

NOVEL
4



Irina The Vampire Cosmonaut

WRITTEN BY Keisuke Makino

ILLUSTRATED BY KAREI

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Vampire
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An illustration of two characters, Bart and Kaye, in a romantic setting. Bart, on the left, has light brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark tuxedo with a bow tie. Kaye, on the right, has long white hair with red highlights and red eyes, wearing a white dress with a floral corsage. They are standing close together, looking at each other with expressions of love and anticipation. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a large, glowing moon. A faint, colorful light trail or comet is visible in the distance.

"Are you
taking me to
the moon?"

"Mm-hmm! We'll
land via lunar orbit
rendezvous. Ready
for takeoff! Let the
countdown begin!"

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five,
four, three, two, one...liftoff."

Taking Bart's hand, Kaye led
him toward the "moon."



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Луна, Лайка и Носфера ту

Original Cover & Logo design by Junya Arai + Bay Bridge Studio

Irina

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Vampire
Cosmonaut

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Seven Seas Entertainment

United Kingdom of Arnack

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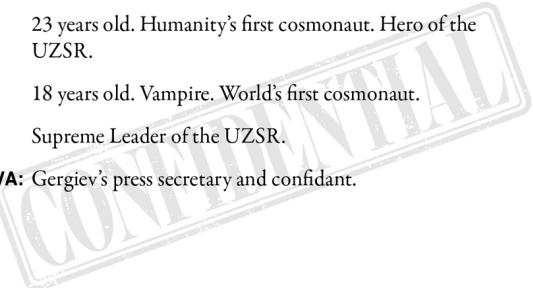


Characters

Луна, Лайка и Носферату

-
- **BART FIFIELD:** 24 years old. Engineer. Member of Arnack One.
 - **KAYE SCARLET:** 24 years old. Dhampir prodigy. Member of Arnack One.

 - **SUNDANCIA SOPHIE ALICIA:** 18 years old. Young queen of the United Kingdom.
 - **JENNIFER SELLERS:** 29 years old. Public relations professional at ANSA's headquarters.
 - **AARON FIFIELD:** 31 years old. Bart's elder brother. UK's first astronaut. Lieutenant colonel.
 - **BRIAN DAMON:** 46 years old. Operations Division Chief.
 - **MIA TOREADOR:** 24 years old. Dhampir and D Room staff member.
 - **STEVE HOWARD:** One of the Hermes Seven. Lieutenant colonel and orbital flight pilot.
 - **VIL KLAUS:** Rocket Development Center supervisor.
 - **OLIVER KISSING:** Manned Spacecraft Center director. Bart and Damon's superior.
 - **LIBERTÉ SCARLET:** Kaye's mother. Deceased.
 - **DOMINIC SCARLET:** Kaye's father. Dockworker.

 - **LEV LEPS:** 23 years old. Humanity's first cosmonaut. Hero of the UZSR.
 - **IRINA LUMINESK:** 18 years old. Vampire. World's first cosmonaut.
 - **FYODOR GERGIEV:** Supreme Leader of the UZSR.
 - **LYUDMILA KHARLOVA:** Gergiev's press secretary and confidant.
- 

[This story is fictional. All characters, organizations, and names are fictitious and have no relation to existing people.]

TSUKI TO LAICA TO NOSFERATU Vol. 4

by Keisuke MAKINO

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Illustration by KAREI

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Chapter 1:

Queen of the Sun, Dragon of the Night

Queen's Eyes

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1961, the United Kingdom of Arnack finally achieved its long-standing goal of manned spaceflight. The ticker-tape parade celebrating the momentous occasion drew four million people, making it the largest event in the nation's history.

At the commemoration ceremony, however, Sundancia Sophie Alicia—the UK's eighteen-year-old queen—sat gloomily in the corner of her dressing room. She ran her thin, delicate fingers through the curly blonde hair that fell over her forehead, then let out a sigh. How many times had she sighed already? It should've been a day of jubilation, yet her spirits refused to lift. She hadn't even been able to bring herself to take a bite of her favorite dessert, apple pie.

The orbital flight had been successful. At that thought, the queen's heart raced with excitement, and her cheeks flushed. The UK's space-age heroes had fulfilled her dreams. That also troubled her, however. Compared to those who spread courage and wonder throughout the world, she was nothing. What right did she have to hand out awards for such achievements?

“Steve Howard! Steve Howard!”

Voices echoed through the air, praising the pilot of the orbital flight.

As Sundancia retreated deeper into the corner, the dressing room door swung open. It was her royal secretary. The man, now in his seventies, had served the kingdom since the reign of Sundancia's father. He was so earnestly loyal that his service to the king had earned him knighthood.

The royal secretary's strict but encouraging tone rang out. “Your Majesty, it's time.”

“All right.”

Sundancia stopped herself from sighing again. She had duties to fulfill, and it simply wouldn't do to face the UK's citizens with a furrowed brow. Looking in the mirror, she forced a smile, donning the mask of the people's beloved queen. Dignity and power were still far beyond her reach, however; her cute, round eyes betrayed her youth.

She was the sparkling beauty of the royal family, as popular as any star on the silver screen. Still, to the young woman, the path to becoming a bona fide queen seemed as long and arduous as the path to the moon.

The royal palace was situated in northeast Arnack, in the capital of Erikson, D.E. The building boasted majestic baroque architecture, and its history predated even the war for independence in the 17th century.

The commemoration ceremony continued into the evening, and the sky was dark when Sundancia finally returned home. She went straight to the royal dog room, the home of her five beloved canines, each of which had its own dedicated attendant. The moment the young queen entered the room, the dogs leaped at her with tails wagging, licking her cheeks.

“Oh! That tickles!” Sundancia laughed. “How are you, my darlings?”

She picked up a small, chestnut-colored dog, petting her gently.

“Can you believe it, Kukushka? One of our astronauts finally went to space, just like your mother!”

Kukushka’s life had been anything but ordinary. In 1960, her mother was the first test dog in the Zirnitra Union to survive a trip through space. Kukushka herself had been a gift from the UZSR’s leader, Fyodor Gergiev.

That wasn’t to say Sundancia had actually wanted the dog. Gergiev simply knew of the queen’s love for canines, and he’d sent Kukushka without warning. The UK government at first suspected the creature was a dog-sized spy; they’d even examined Kukushka thoroughly for hidden recording devices. In the end, they found

Kukushka to be, unsurprisingly, just a dog.

Actually, Kukushka had been little more than a chance for Gergiev to boast. The “gift” was a way to hammer home his nation’s successful endeavor in space. The thought of the dog being used for a political purpose made Sundancia’s blood boil, but Kukushka herself had done no wrong, and it saddened the queen to think that the little dog had been separated from her mother. So, Sundancia adopted Kukushka, raising her as lovingly as all her other pets. Fortunately, the concept of battling for national supremacy didn’t exist in the royal dog room. The dogs lived together quite happily.

Sundancia opened the window and gazed at the night sky, glimmering with thousands of stars. She thought of the strange sight the astronaut Steve Howard had described at a press conference upon his return.

“I saw hundreds, if not thousands, of luminous lights twinkle in the darkness of space,” he’d reported. “They were like fireflies—so, so beautiful. I wonder if they were God’s work?”

Howard spoke as if he’d been through an epiphany. Sundancia didn’t know exactly what he’d witnessed, but she wondered if perhaps he’d come into contact with the Great Creator.

“Are there really fireflies in space?” she mused. “And what does the UK look like from all the way up there?”

The unknown world of the stars had captured the young girl’s heart and refused to let go. Sundancia had fallen in love with outer space five years ago, when she was just thirteen. She’d looked up at the sky with her bedridden father, watching Zirnitra’s Parusnyi One, the world’s first man-made satellite.

Citizens of the UK deeply respected Sundancia’s father for leading the nation to victory in the Great War. He hadn’t gone into battle himself, but the air force and navy were under the royal family’s control. The king had also headed the national Solar Church, earning him the nickname “the Sun King.”

“We’re entering the space age,” he’d told Sundancia. “When we finally achieve victory in space, the world will know true peace.”

The king had seen space as a battlefield—and Parusnyi One’s radio signals as an assassin’s bullets.

Sundancia was different. In space, she saw the future. Like so many others, she'd read the best-selling science fiction novel *Fly Me to the Moon*, and she was an avid fan of Professor Vil Klaus's space-themed TV show.

Yet as his passing drew near, the king had continued to lecture his daughter on what he called "the necessity of victory." As Sundancia was his only descendant, making her his sure successor, the king lectured her ceaselessly.

"Space will be a new frontier of war," he'd say. "Just as I brought our people victory once, you too must fulfill your duties."

In time, Sundancia came to see space as a war zone, and the UZSR as a foe to defeat.

In 1958, just as Arnack launched its first satellite, the Sun King breathed his last. Sundancia became the UK's queen at the tender age of fourteen. A grand coronation followed, and the citizens cheered joyfully for their young, beautiful new ruler. On the faces of the nation's political leaders, however, Sundancia had seen nothing but worry and uncertainty. She'd delivered her coronation speech that day with a heavy heart.

Four years had passed since Sundancia ascended the throne, and circumstances in the United Kingdom of Arnack had worsened. The country struggled with dhampir discrimination within its borders; outside them, it was in the midst of a cold war with the UZSR. There was conflict everywhere. Although Sundancia wasn't involved in national politics, she felt the weight of responsibility as her country's leader. Still, she couldn't find a way to alleviate her concerns, and her official duties left little time for anything else.

Her mother's advice on the matter had proved largely unhelpful. "All you have to worry about is your own official duties, and those are enough," the dowager queen had said.

Sundancia's royal secretary had likewise just scolded her for her worries. "Our nation's ruler must not face citizens with uncertainty. It's your responsibility to set them at ease with the sunlight of your smile."

Just as her father had been the Sun King, Sundancia dreamed of being Sun Queen more than anything else. She wanted to lead her people into a bright future. And yet, her anxiety only grew. The royal dog room was the only place she could be at peace. Her beloved pets

never saw her as a queen, just the ordinary human she was at heart.

Leading Kukushka to the balcony, Sundancia looked up at the starry sky.

“I just don’t see why we have to compete over space,” she muttered. “But keep that strictly between you and me, all right, Kukushka?”

Of course, Sundancia was never to speak such words to the people of Arnack.

Black Dragon’s Eyes

• очи цирнитра •

“**H**OW IS THIS POSSIBLE?!”

In the Zirnitran capital, Sangrad, Fyodor Gergiev’s rage echoed through his office.

As far as the UZSR was concerned, achieving manned spaceflight in 1961 had been utterly unfeasible for the UK. Publicly available ANSA documentation and intel from the UZSR’s spies suggested that their manned launch would take place in February 1962. It seemed preposterous that they would successfully reschedule for September 1961, yet they’d done just that.

Gergiev called Zirnitra’s rocket development supervisor, Slava Korovin, for a full report.

“They reduced their planned three laps around Earth to just two,” explained Korovin. “That was due to piloting system issues and a reported problem with their heat-resistant paneling. But to think they’d forgo even a test launch... It’s truly astonishing.”

“Hmph. They succeeded. We have no choice but to recognize their achievement.” Like Korovin, Gergiev held some admiration for their rivals.



To the Union's supreme leader, the key was knowing when to take ground and when to give it. Whenever he gave ground strategically, he had to take ground elsewhere. Although his

approach was haphazard and improvisational, he expected victory in the long run.

"At any rate," Gergiev continued, "we must update our plans accordingly."

The world was split in two, and to turn developing countries into allies, the UZSR needed to exhibit its dominion over space. Although they aimed to colonize Mars, the moon was proving useful as a first-stage goal, driving Gergiev to pour much of the national budget into the space program. With this tactic, Zirnitra had snatched early victories, including the world's first satellite, lunar probe, and Mars probe. Then they'd achieved manned spaceflight.

In a show of global superiority, Zirnitra had named two giant cargo ships after its cosmonauts. The *Lev Leps* and the *Irina Luminesk* made trips around the world.

All that remained was to pressure Arnack until it raised the white flag. After all, the country only had an edge when it came to hamburgers and baseball—or so the UZSR thought. Now Arnack had somehow clawed its way onto the stage.

"I expect our next performance will be a grand one, Comrade Chief!" said Gergiev.

As he gave Korovin instructions, however, the supreme leader was already in the process of requesting alternate plans from a different design bureau chief. He had that luxury, thanks to his dictatorial power.

Yet Gergiev's role was far from smooth sailing. Last fall, a huge explosion at the Albinar Cosmodrome had killed many talented people—a painful loss. The Cabinet was also locked in a fierce power struggle. Gergiev expected betrayal. He knew his foes were awaiting the tiniest hint of weakness or a glimpse of anything they could exploit.

When Gergiev finished his call with Korovin, a woman eating strawberry varenye handed him a draft of a telegram congratulating the UK on their successful orbital flight. The woman's name was Lyudmila Kharlova; she was Gergiev's speechwriter and advisor.

"Well?" she asked with a scheming smile, her green eyes

narrowing.

Gergiev read the telegram and frowned. The document praised Arnack's efforts: *"I hope that your ability to venture into space paves the way for world peace and human prosperity."*

The point of the thing was near its conclusion: *"It is a clear, present truth that the peaceful use of outer space is a heavy responsibility that falls upon the shoulders of our two great nations. It would be a momentous first step toward scientific progress and military disarmament if we used space development as an avenue to join forces—to combine our technologies and resources in joint cooperation."*

Gergiev ran his finger along the line that mentioned joining forces and hummed thoughtfully. He wasn't entirely against the idea. In truth, when it came to the peaceful use of technologies, a joint agreement encompassing biology and space medicine already linked the nations. The agreement wasn't between their governments but rather between ANSA and the National Institute of Science.

Despite that, the Union and UK kept a wary eye on each other, and the countries had yet to actually achieve anything noteworthy through cooperation. After all, the Union insisted on keeping its technology secret, expressing no desire to reveal any of it. The celebratory telegram likewise implied that the UZSR intended to maintain its lead.

Lyudmila put some varenye on her tongue and swallowed it. She indulged in the taste for a moment, then brought up another order of business. "Andrei is expected on October 30."

So, Andrei would soon be born in a closed city in the far north. The news brought a smile to Gergiev's face. "Well, then!" the supreme leader exclaimed. "We must celebrate the birth of such an adorable child!"

"And as for our gifts to Imprisoned Island?"

"Proceed in secret. We'll announce them to the world on Revolution Day next year, for the sake of both our nations. They're sure to be happier if we send them with our two *cosmonauts*."

In the seas south of Arnack, there was an island nation on good terms with the UZSR. Arnack had nicknamed the country "Imprisoned Island," claiming that the Zirnitra Union had taken its freedom. They'd even dispatched troops in an attempt to overthrow its government.

Gergiev was concerned for the island; he felt enemy forces were surrounding it, forcing it into isolation.

"We won't just let those hamburger gobblers do as they please!" he exclaimed. *The world's in my hands*, he seemed to add silently, spinning the globe on his desk with a cold grin.

History

In April 1961, cosmonaut Lev Leps of the Zirnitra Union (UZSR) became the first human to achieve orbital flight. Celebrating this success, Supreme Leader Fyodor Gergiev sent the United Kingdom of Arnack (UK) a challenging message: "In the near future, we will land on the moon!"

His words kick-started a race to achieve a manned lunar landing. Though the UZSR seemed impossibly far ahead, Arnack achieved manned orbital flight in September of that same year. The feat allowed the nation to maintain its status as a global superpower. Still, the moon was incredibly distant—380,000 kilometers away.

The UZSR had already photographed the lunar surface successfully, but the UK's first two attempts ended in failure. The first probe couldn't complete the task; the second didn't launch correctly. A third probe targeted the moon but missed by some 48,000 kilometers. Furthermore, since its antenna faced away from Earth, its radio signals were unreadable.

The UK had but one potential card up its sleeve. In October 1961, the nation's test flight for a multistage rocket, Chronos I, succeeded. Chronos I diverged noticeably from earlier rockets in one important way: Rather than being designed as a missile, it was developed purely for space travel, boasting superior horsepower and load capacity compared to rockets for orbital flight.

Chronos I's design, however, was little more than a first step. A manned spaceflight to the moon required vastly improved load capacities; the UK would also need to conduct a host of other tests. Meanwhile, the UZSR fell into mysterious silence. After August 1961, when cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin achieved an orbital flight duration exceeding twenty-four hours, the nation apparently made very little progress in space development.

As the Space Race heated up, so too did conflict on Earth. In the Far East, war broke out in a nation split between backing from the UK and UZSR. The UK subsequently established a military support center, dispatching a large number of reinforcements. The proxy war became something of a quagmire, and casualties ran high.

The cold war between the two superpowers spread across the globe, entailing espionage, sabotage, assassination, and overthrown governments. In the Union, families watched each other carefully, and neighbors spied on one another. Conversations were tapped, letters opened, and homes invaded to weed out UK spies.

As the world entered the spring of 1962, space development came to a standstill, and global tensions ran high.

Chapter 2: The Long Road to the Moon

Blue Eyes

A TINY COMPACT SATELLITE launched into the evening sky and vanished, leaving behind a white smoke trail.

The dhampir children's cheers rang out. "We did it!"

It was the start of spring, and blooming magnolias brought bursts of color to the town. Bart and Kaye were running a children's science class in the Moonlight District. Kaye had organized the class on her own, separate from her public relations duties as a member of Arnack One. Bart showed up dutifully each and every week, helping her to educate dhampir youth on the wonders of space, and clumsy Kaye often relied on Bart as tech support.

"Thanks for coming on your day off," Kaye said apologetically as she and Bart watched the compact satellite. "I'd look after this alone if I were better with my hands."

"Don't worry about it," he replied. "I didn't have any plans anyway. Besides, if you made the compact satellite yourself, it wouldn't just misfire—people would probably mistake it for a missile."

"What?!" Kaye pouted.

The dhampir children echoed Bart. "He's totally right!"

"You guys are the worst," she muttered.

Still, it was crystal clear that she was enjoying herself. Although she'd once needed to hide her love of outer space, she could now discuss it openly and happily.

Kaye had led a protest march last September, on the day of the manned orbital flight, to bring attention to the hard work of dhampirs in the space program. Not everyone took the news well, though. Many dhampirs frowned upon her actions, and she had gotten hate mail from the human supremacy movement. It seemed as though the more popular and well known Kaye became, the more people tried to knock

her down.

That said, most people were apparently fans of Kaye. Thanks to her efforts with cutting-edge technology, the young dhampir woman was as highly regarded as any dhampir athlete. Even humans hoped she might be the secret weapon Arnack needed to overcome the Zirnitra Union.

Discrimination against dhampirs in general was still far from over. Even now, segregationist signs were commonplace across the country, and many human-biased media outlets hadn't reported on Kaye's march at all. Human-dhampir conflict was only escalating; true reconciliation, if such a thing was possible, had a long way to go.

"Hey, Bart!" called Kaye. "How about another launch?" The smiling dhampir held up some sort of crooked cylinder.

"Did you, uh...make that yourself?" Bart asked.

Kaye looked unimpressed. "Hold on a sec. Why do you look scared?"

Bart turned to the dhampir kids, his eyes glinting mischievously. "Kaye's launching a missile! Everyone evacuate!"

The kids darted away, scattering like baby spiders. Bart fled along with them. He could hear Kaye yelling behind him.

I can't believe I've gotten so close to the dhampir community, he thought. It's all thanks to Kaye.

It had been almost a whole year since Kaye's compact satellite crashed down on him as he sat on that cotton field hill. When they first met, he was nervous just talking to her, but now they were like comrades-in-arms with their sights set on the moon.

Bart had been through a lot since joining ANSA, but meeting Kaye had changed him. Her professional dedication and the emotions that fueled her had made a deep impression on Bart, turning him into the man he was today. After all, it was thanks to Kaye that the queen herself honored Bart at the celebration following the manned orbital flight.

He turned and looked at Kaye. She knelt, preparing to launch her compact satellite. When she hit the switch, the rocket flew into the air. The look on Kaye's face said it all: *I've got this, just you watch!*

As Bart had expected, however, Kaye's rocket went every direction

besides the way it was supposed to go.

“Whoops.”

The rocket soared through the air like a heat-seeking missile, heading straight for...Bart.

“Whoa!” he cried.

“Get out of the way!” the dhampir kids yelled.

Everyone’s excited voices echoed long into the night.

The Zirnitra Union had declared April 12—the historic date on which cosmonaut Lev Leps flew into space—a public holiday called Cosmonaut Day. The nation held a huge parade in its capital, Sangrad, to commemorate Leps’s achievement.

The parade made global news, and Bart was glued to the footage on his TV. Lev walked at the front of the parade in ceremonial military dress, waving to the crowds with a relaxed grin. Next to him, Irina stood under the shade of a parasol, smiling bashfully.

“Wow. She’s all grown up,” Bart said to himself.

When he’d seen images of Irina at the ticker-tape parade the year before, he almost couldn’t believe such a young girl had really flown into space. She seemed like an entirely different person now. Her ceremonial dress made her look like an aristocrat’s daughter, and there was something mystical about her—she looked simultaneously wizened and youthfully naive, wrapped in both light and darkness. Since Irina was a pureblood vampire, and Kaye was a dhampir, their beauty was different.

After Irina’s existence was revealed, the Zirnitra Union publicized the date of her historical spaceflight: December 12, 1960. The flight’s exact details remained unknown, and no great celebrations like those for Lev were held for Irina’s achievement. Bart didn’t know how the UZSR treated vampires, but he was willing to bet it wasn’t great.

The news program cut to commercials, and a hit song started playing—one Bart heard a lot recently. *“I wanna take you to the moon, fly you to the moon!”*

The musicians had used D Room's slogan for their song's title and lyrics. That was the only connection, though. Ultimately, it was just a love song without a single reference to computers or dhampirs. The single was merely part of the space craze sweeping the UK. The space program was like a light at the end of a tunnel; it was a beacon of hope amid all the bad news—local *and* international—that flooded the channels.

Times were changing, and the city of Laika Crescent, where Bart and Kaye resided, was changing with them. The Keighley Research Center had grown in scope and been renamed the Manned Spacecraft Center. As that new name suggested, the facility handled anything and everything related to spacecraft development. But it wasn't just space research and development that were enhanced—the astronaut training facility was improved, and the coastal Rocket Launch Center facilities also expanded.

The Manned Spacecraft Center's new director was a mover and shaker named Oliver Kissing. He'd been a high-ranking engineering professor at ANSA's headquarters, even acting as space development advisor to the prime minister.

The Manned Spacecraft Center was the headquarters of the manned lunar landing project, Project Hyperion. Soon, the center's staff roster ballooned from 800 to 3,000 people. Sensing opportunities to profit, businesses pushed into neighboring areas, and universities coordinated with ANSA to implement astronautic departments. It all meant that Laika Crescent was quickly becoming a true "space city."

Even dhampirs were affected by the national space craze's economic impact, and Kaye's example inspired many to take ANSA's entrance exam. The dhampirs' pass rate was low compared to humans, but those who did pass began working at space facilities countrywide. It made Kaye happy to think that, in some small way, she'd changed the flow of history.

Another dhampir was even joining D Room. On her first day, she was invited to join the team for lunch, as was tradition. Like Bart expected, however, the new employee shrieked after merely sipping her tomato soup.

"Augh! It's so spicy! Is this how ANSA's soup is normally flavored?!" she asked, eyes welling with tears.

It wasn't; it was simply a D Room initiation rite courtesy of her

training supervisor, Mia.

“This has pretty much become established hazing,” Bart whispered to Kaye, who giggled.

“Let’s just hope she doesn’t quit on her first day.”

D Room’s staff—the Angels of Liberté—were now part of Project Hyperion’s development team. They’d made the cut thanks to a recommendation from Division Chief Damon—director of the orbital spaceflight—and because they’d earned high praise ensuring the manned orbital spaceflight succeeded. More than anything, Bart was happy to see D Room’s dhampirs elevated above mere calculators, receiving due credit as members of the spacecraft guidance and navigation group.

Since so few people at ANSA had in-depth knowledge of astronautics *and* computers, Bart, Kaye, and D Room were in the spotlight. Apart from their regular calculation duties, they designed specialized calculation software for lunar landing spacecraft. They’d also taken responsibility for programming research and development.

The once-reviled nickname for D Room, “the Vampires’ Nest,” had essentially vanished. And thanks to public support, they could upgrade their old “white elephant” computer to a newer, significantly more expensive model. On top of that, the three ACE staff members who’d been involved in Steve Howard’s spaceflight also joined D Room’s team.

Naturally, there was still something of an invisible wall between D Room’s humans and dhampirs. However, since they shared the language of space development, their mutual respect and understanding far surpassed the state of race relations in society at large. D Room’s new human employees often told Bart that his friendship with Kaye was what allowed them to fit in so smoothly. Their kind comments sparked within him both joy and embarrassment and made Kaye giggle bashfully.

Having male teammates set Bart a little more at ease, but he felt the pressure. He was the first human to work in D Room, but the new human staff had all studied computers for far longer. If he didn’t keep his game up, he’d be their senior in name only.

Regardless, the ACE guys had no choice but to admit they simply weren’t on Kaye’s level. Bart was glad they praised her, yet he also felt a twinge of jealousy when humans laughed, smiled, and chatted with

Kaye, or when she asked them to handle some task. Although he knew he had to concentrate on his own responsibilities, Bart found himself staring at Kaye as he tidied punch cards.

Then something cold and hard slid down his back. His heart stopped; the punch cards fell from his hands and scattered across the floor. “Ack!”

He turned and saw Mia, ruler in hand, glowering at him like a prison warden. “Lack of focus is how accidents happen.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

The ACE guys and Kaye glanced at him, puzzled, as he scrambled to pick up the punch cards. Mia also shot him a pointed stare.

“Er, what is it now?” Bart asked.

“Call it surveillance,” she replied.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Despite Bart’s minor qualms about D Room’s new staff, more people now shared his dream, and together they comprised a team that would make travel to the moon possible. They developed real-time guidance formulas, brainstormed spacecraft control technology, and tested it all in a simulator. Going forward, it’d be a straight shot to the moon.

Or, at least, everyone wished it’d be that simple. In truth, the orbital flight Arnack had achieved amounted to little more than laps around Earth. In other words, Project Hyperion was still a far cry from having the moon in its sights.

The project’s overall goals could be summarized as follows: First, launch the biggest, most cutting-edge rocket the world had ever seen. Second, reach the moon, which was 380,000 kilometers away and orbited Earth at one kilometer per second. Third, safely land astronauts there. That wasn’t even the end goal, though. The team also had to plot a course from the moon back to Earth *and* ensure the ship survived reentry through the atmosphere—much easier said than done.

ANSA would have to overcome a mountain of unique problems to pull off Project Hyperion. Broadly speaking, there were five key challenges.

One: creating complicated spaceflight technology—specifically, a way for two spacecraft to dock and rendezvous. “Rendezvous,” in this

case, referred to multiple spacecraft flying parallel, an important innovation required for future projects.

Two: perfecting moon surface probes. The separate department that handled lunar photography had seen failure after failure thus far.

Three: properly training a suitable team of astronauts and constructing an environmental system for them within the spacecraft.

Four: manufacturing a large-scale rocket that could deliver a spacecraft to the moon.

Five: creating a way for said spacecraft to launch *from* the moon.

Even considered in isolation, these were incredibly difficult problems.

Numerous science fiction novelists had written about landing on the moon, but almost all of them had predicted a successful lunar landing in the '70s. For Project Hyperion to succeed in the '60s, the team would need to surpass people's wildest imaginations.

A project of this magnitude required everyone to work together as one. The biggest problem of all, however, wasn't technological...

"The spacecraft design specifications changed again," announced Bart, holding up some documents.

D Room heaved a collective sigh.

As ANSA grew, it became a real challenge to manage the Manned Spacecraft Center's teams and departments. They were constantly changed and renamed, each instance demanding recalculations. The organizational shake-ups even threw off Division Chief Damon.

These changes weren't the fault of any one person. The problem was simply that space development was the biggest project in history. If a lunar landing required a rocket and spacecraft with seven million individual parts, for instance, then the previously unrelated field of mechanical engineering suddenly needed to contribute to the project. Arnack's manpower just couldn't keep up with the incredible rate of technological development.

On top of that, ANSA didn't have sole ownership of the space

program. The UK's government, which set ANSA's budget, had strong opinions of its own. Testing and production within the space program involved both military divisions and private companies, which in turn meant disagreements. Ideas, concepts, and profits collided as the scientists and engineers in charge butted heads. They couldn't settle on a firm direction, and all the bickering hit D Room especially hard.

"All right, everyone. Let's take a break." Kaye reached both arms upward, stretching. "Look at all the punch cards we need to throw away. If we put them all in one big pile, do you think *they'd* reach the moon?"

"That's not even funny," Bart said with a sigh.

Prior to joining Project Hyperion, D Room staff hadn't been told the purpose of their calculations. This too had changed, but the clarity just exposed that the space program was scrambling like a chicken with its head cut off.

Mission specifications and project goals switched up weekly, so the software design requests D Room received were equally disjointed. Each time D Room received a request, the department that made it told them to process it immediately. Without clear goals, working in D Room felt like putting the cart before the horse. It was an awful position to be in.

Everyone in D Room had their own thoughts about the infighting, but as employees in the trenches, they had nowhere to air those opinions. Even if they did, it wasn't as if they could've offered a solution.

As the days went by, the D Room team felt as if they were reaching blindly into the darkness of space. That hit the new employees hardest; little by little, their morale dropped. Everyone sank into a swamp of despair, and even the computer's beeps sounded like sorrowful cries.

"Come on, everyone," said Kaye. "We're facing the unknown! It's only natural to find obstacles blocking our way."

She stood, pointing at the tattered flag hung on the office wall. It bore an important slogan—the one they'd shouted to the world on the day of their protest march. "Fly *you* to the moon."

"That's us, right?!" Kaye exclaimed. "We're flying everyone to the moon!"

Her words lifted D Room's spirits and brought some light to their gloomy faces.

"Kaye's right. We're the only ones who can do this," Bart chimed in. "So, let's get to it! However crazy things are out there, we can at least make sure everyone here in D Room is on the same page!"

As long as they just kept piling up those punch cards, they'd eventually find the answers ANSA was looking for. By converting orbital mechanics and theories into numbers, they were creeping ever farther down the road to the moon.

In addition to their everyday D Room duties, Bart and Kaye kept doing public relations work as the "Arnack One" team. Since space fever was at an all-time high, people welcomed them everywhere they went. Magazines and newspapers covered them, and ANSA even sent the pair to huge festivals throughout the Carnival season.

Neither Bart nor Kaye particularly enjoyed the limelight, but they felt duty-bound to educate the public on how ANSA used its funds. After all, space development required astronomical amounts of taxpayer money.

Thanks to their roles within Arnack One, public relations executive Jennifer Sellers called the pair to ANSA headquarters' Office of Public Information, where she gave them new instructions. "Next month, you'll head to the 21st Century Expo," she announced.

Bart's heart thumped with joy. The exposition, which would take place in Marine City in northwest Arnack, would be a completely international event. Well, *almost* completely international—the UZSR and neighboring nations had refused to attend even though the organizers invited them. Thus, twenty-four countries would participate in the six-month Expo, which was set to showcase world technology some four decades into the future.

There would be more to the Expo than spotlighting attendees' scientific and engineering acumen, however. The event was also a simple recruiting drive. The UK still trailed behind the UZSR in terms of space travel, so they wanted to gather thousands of the world's greatest

minds to help close the distance. Besides, astronautics encompassed more than one area of expertise; it required physicists, chemists, biologists, and a host of other specialists.

Arnack had already tried tons of slogans to entice potential recruits:

“Fast raises and promotions!”

“Fame and fortune!”

“See the world!”

Finding talent had proven tougher than they expected, and so the UK's government had come up with the idea of a giant exposition. They'd invested a huge sum into science exhibits for the event, collaborating with ANSA on model rockets and satellites for displays. Then they'd poured money into a marketing campaign to lure attendees.

In light of all that, it was only natural that Bart and Kaye would attend the Expo to work on public relations. Bart had intended to go anyway; he'd planned to take time off and pay for the trip out of pocket. He'd always hoped this sort of opportunity would present itself, so he couldn't have been happier or more excited. Touring the 21st Century Expo with Kaye was bound to be more fun than going alone.

“Wipe that grin off your face, Bart,” Jennifer ordered.

Bart snapped back to reality. *This is work*, he told himself, trying to look serious.

Even Kaye's eyes sparkled in expectation. She was just as thrilled as Bart. “Will we get to explore the pavilions?”

“Uh-huh,” Jennifer said unenthusiastically. “But your main task will take place during the Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. That'll be held over the course of three days. On the last day, you two will give a computer engineering talk.”

“Roger that!” Bart said immediately. Kaye nodded as well. It'd been six months since ANSA appointed them “billboards,” and the nerves that once racked them were almost entirely gone.

As soon as Jennifer saw that they were on the same page, she outlined their schedule. “You'll stay in Marine City two nights and three days. It's on the other side of the country, so you'll leave Laika Crescent on May 11. The next day, you'll explore the pavilions and mingle with guests. The following day, May 13, you'll attend the conference. You'll

return to Laika Crescent that evening. Kaye, ANSA wants you to nominate someone to manage D Room while you're away."

Kaye thought for a moment. "Mia can do it."

Mia was a good manager, and she knew D Room well enough to train new arrivals. Everyone respected her work—they just wished she'd stop pulling pranks.

"What sort of conference should we expect?" Bart asked.

"We're still finalizing details. It'll cover every aspect of space development, though. Here's a basic rundown." Jennifer tossed a document in their general direction; she clearly wasn't particularly interested in the contents.

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry was organizing the conference, and ANSA was sponsoring it alongside a space development nonprofit. The main event consisted of scientists announcing important research findings. Since the state governor and several other politicians would attend, however, the conference would also focus on presentations intended to attract funding.

Flicking through the document Jennifer had given them, Bart saw a page listing speaker names. "Whoa...hang on a second," he said, feeling suddenly stupefied.

The prime minister of the UK would give opening remarks. Other presenters included Rocket Development Center Supervisor Vil Klaus and the Manned Spacecraft Center Director Oliver Kissing. Members of the ANSA board and the government's scientific advisory board were also listed, as well as higher-ups from major aircraft manufacturers. It was a who's who of the industry.

Bart felt that *his* name was entirely out of place in such a star-studded lineup. Just imagining himself in the group's company sent a shiver down his spine. What if he couldn't muster the courage to speak? The rush of excitement he'd felt mere moments ago faded entirely.

"Oh, right. It's not in that document, but on the day of your talk, the queen will attend," Jennifer said, adding insult to injury.

She says it like it doesn't even matter! Bart felt himself tremble. "The...the queen?!"

When he met Queen Sundancia at last year's ceremony, he'd frozen the moment she smiled at him. He'd barely managed to stammer

a polite greeting. Fortunately, Sundancia did most of the talking.

"This is really, uh...a nerve-racking amount of pressure. Right, Kaye?"

Although Bart was petrified, Kaye smiled as always. "It's an honor. Am I nervous? Absolutely. Still, let's give this our best shot!"

"Yeah!" Kaye's positivity always raised his spirits.

"As usual, Kaye's the only one I can rely on," muttered Jennifer. She had nothing but respect for the other woman's talents now. The anti-dhampir prejudice she'd shown when she and Kaye first met a year ago had all but vanished.

Bart began preparing for the conference immediately. The individual presentations' exact contents and direction still weren't clear, but he knew he had a lot of basics to brush up on if he hoped to keep up. After each workday ended, he and Kaye went to the Manned Spacecraft Center's resource room to read publicly released ANSA documents, theses, and related literature.

Astronautics moved a mile a minute, however. It sometimes seemed as though what was considered correct one day was proven wrong the next day. On top of that, space development encompassed numerous fields, and experts coined new terms almost daily.

"Now I know why even ANSA personnel can't make heads or tails of each other," Bart muttered, slumping across the table. His brain was fried.

In front of him, Kaye glared intensely at the huge pile of papers she was studying. She was probably committing them to her eidetic memory. When she finished, Bart asked if that was the case. Sure enough, he was right.

"Yep, I managed to memorize most of them." Kaye smiled bashfully, crunching a sugar cube between her teeth.

Bart felt the pressure growing. *Is it even possible to prove I'm worthy of being Kaye's partner before we reach the moon?*

Day after day, he did his best. The longer he spent with Kaye,

though, the more their conversations turned from study to leisure—specifically, to the coming Expo. Commercials had been airing on television for days, and it was impossible not to feel excited.

“I’m so glad we get to go for work!” Kaye said, browsing through an Expo brochure. “Traveling that far is expensive. It isn’t easy to take time off either.”

“You can say that again.”

“Since this is a business trip, will we be allowed to have fun?”

“Huh? Do you think we should walk around the whole time glowering like Division Chief Damon?” Bart joked.

Kaye shot him an impish smile. “Ooh. Maybe I’ll tell him you said that.”

“Don’t! Please don’t!”

Kaye’s fangs peeked out from her mouth as she laughed. She tucked her hair behind her pointed ears, a silent reminder that she and Bart were different races. He knew that, of course, but the fact only struck him at moments like this. He was so accustomed to being around Kaye now that he didn’t even notice most of the time.

“Anyway, I’m really looking forward to it.” Kaye excitedly flipped a page. “Apparently, there’ll even be an exhibit where you can experience space firsthand!”

When Kaye went off on tangents about her love of outer space, Bart wished their conversations would go on forever.

Anytime they kept working after the last bus home, Kaye jumped on the back of Bart’s motorcycle, and he drove her to the Moonlight District. They were past the point of asking for or offering rides—it was routine for Bart to take Kaye home. For a while, Kaye had worn an engineering helmet when she rode Bart’s motorcycle, but now she had her own proper motorcycle helmet.

The evening spring breeze felt wonderful as they passed the forest where Kaye had once suffered an attack of Nosferatu Syndrome. Bart never mentioned Kaye’s condition. Given how she felt about it, it wasn’t

an easy topic to bring up. Still, the sight of her sucking her own blood as tears streamed down her face was burned into Bart's mind. He never wanted to see Kaye cry like that ever again. He always wanted her to smile.

One night, Bart dropped Kaye off near her house as usual and then made to leave. She called out to him before he could go.

"Um, Bart?" Under the moonlight, something about her expression looked nervous.

"What's up?"

"Well..."

Kaye's apprehension was getting to him. "Yeah?"

"Um, d-do you..."

What's she trying to say? he wondered. Wait, is she...?

Still sounding sheepish, Kaye found the words to finish her sentence. "Do you want to come UFO spotting with me?"



“Huh?” Bart couldn’t believe his ears. *UFO spotting?*

Kaye blushed, but her face was entirely serious.

“UFO? You mean...unidentified flying objects?”

She nodded childishly. “I’ve heard rumors that they’re showing up in the southern skies in the Moonlight District.”

There had been a few suspicious UFO sightings before the space craze got into full swing. Eyewitness reports had gone way up since, and couples often came out of nowhere claiming that they’d been abducted by aliens. The National Radio Astronomy Observatory responded by probing for extraterrestrial life, while the government established a specialized UFO investigation agency, worried that the flying objects might be UZSR spy satellites.

Bart was skeptical about the existence of aliens. He hoped other intelligent life existed somewhere out in the vastness of space, but...

“UFO spotting,” he said, his confusion obvious.

He’d never expected Kaye to suggest something like that. Since she’d been so hesitant in the first place, she must also have known how it sounded.

“I’m, um...interested in aliens. Er, in the *unknown*, I mean,” Kaye said, fishing for excuses. “Still, I can’t really go UFO spotting all by myself.”

“Why don’t you want to go alone?”

“Well, um...” Momentarily lost for words, Kaye looked at her feet, her body language revealing a hint of fear.

That gave Bart an inkling of what she was getting at. “Kaye, are you afraid of aliens?”

Kaye grimaced. “Eep!”

“Are you afraid of being abducted?”

“N-no, not at all!”

Bart knew he’d hit the nail on the head, though, and Kaye’s reaction brought out his cheeky side. “Apparently, if you’re abducted, little gray men examine your whole body, stab your belly with needles, and yank out your teeth with weird machines.”

“Urgh...” Kaye put one hand to her stomach and the other to her

mouth, her crystalline red eyes darting with fear.

“So, you *are* afraid of aliens. That’s why you don’t want to go by yourself.”

“N-no!” Kaye insisted, waving him off. She suddenly spoke faster. “I’m afraid of going by myself because of the Solar Flare Club, and because the viewing area’s too far away to walk to, and because—if I spot a UFO when I’m all alone, how am I supposed to prove it?! Also, um...when I asked Mia what she thought of UFOs, she just laughed at me.”

“All right, all right.” Bart couldn’t stand how desperate and pitiful the girl sounded. “I’ll go with you.”

Kaye’s crimson eyes brightened with relief. “You will? Thank you!”

“I’m kind of interested in UFOs myself,” he added. That said, he thought they stood a much better chance of running into the Solar Flare Club than of seeing a UFO. At least they’d have his motorcycle if they had to get away quickly. “Anyway, how about next Sunday, if you have no plans?”

“Sure! Most UFO sightings happen at night. We’ll need to bring...” Excited, Kaye began detailing plans she’d clearly put lots of thought into.

Meanwhile, Bart reflected on how much fun it’d be just to spend time with Kaye outside of work. While he certainly was intrigued by UFOs, he still would’ve joined her even if he wasn’t.

Bart and Kaye went UFO spotting in the southern Moonlight District, near marshlands where meadows grew strong and thick. They arrived at four in the afternoon, spread a blanket on the ground, and sat observing the skies for three hours. Unfortunately, the only things that flew overhead that evening were birds and planes. The pair was alone; to a passerby, they wouldn’t have looked like anything more than a couple of birdwatchers.

“Not a single UFO,” Kaye grumbled.

They'd almost entirely finished the drinks and butter cookies they brought. Though the days were long in southern Arnack, night would soon fall.

The once-enthusiastic Kaye sat with her head hanging low. "I'm sorry, Bart."

"It's okay. These are UFOs we're watching for—it's not like they grow on trees." Bart felt bad that Kaye was apologizing so sincerely, since he'd never actually expected to see anything. Her hopes were obviously dashed, so he searched for something to say to perk her up. "Sometimes it's nice to get away from work and just relax, right?"

Humid winds carried the scent of spring flowers. The burning-red sun sank over the horizon, coloring the sky a beautiful pink and purple ombre. Soon after, the full moon came out, and the stars winked into view from their hiding places.

"Are we really going to reach the moon?" Kaye asked in a whisper.

"We can't say either way at this point," Bart replied.

ANSA's spacecraft design specifications had changed again, which meant D Room was adding another round of punch cards to the growing graveyard. The roadmap for Project Hyperion described the initiative's goal as "achieving a lunar landing by 1967." With progress at a standstill, however, that was starting to seem unfeasible.

The biggest problem was that they still hadn't figured out a key aspect of the project—namely, how to return a spacecraft to Earth safely *after* a lunar landing. Takeoff and landing were easily Project Hyperion's biggest challenges, and ANSA personnel were split between two solutions. Some were proponents of the direct ascent method the Manned Spacecraft Center recommended.

Others subscribed to the Earth orbit rendezvous method, or EOR, Professor Klaus had suggested, which the Rocket Development Center supported. The Manned Spacecraft Center was a huge part of ANSA, but the Rocket Development Center was even bigger. Six thousand of ANSA's twenty thousand employees worked there—double the Manned Spacecraft Center's staff.

The decision would've been easy if one method were superior, but both had unique problems.

Direct ascent was theoretically simple: launch from Earth straight to the moon, land there, explore and examine, then relaunch from the moon and return to Earth. The problem was that the rocket ANSA was currently developing, Chronos, couldn't carry enough fuel for a return trip. It had a clear load limit that couldn't be increased. The only rocket that *could* carry an adequate quantity of fuel was the enormous Galactica, which existed only on paper, essentially a battleship-sized product of the imagination.

There were two additional problems: Building Galactica would consume ANSA's budget almost entirely, and the general consensus was that it would be impossible even to develop the technology to finish the rocket within ten years.

Klaus himself had once favored direct ascent, saying that he liked its simplicity. He did a complete turnaround when faced with the calculations for the launch, landing, and fuel, stating that it was impossible.

Yet even when the direct ascent method fell out of favor, Kissing refused to give up on it. "Rockets are for the Rocket Development Center to work out," he opined.

The EOR method, on the other hand, was designed with the Chronos rocket in mind. The plan was to launch a disassembled spacecraft on multistage rockets that would rendezvous in orbit. The team would assemble and fuel the spacecraft there, then fly to the moon, bypassing the problem of rocket load capacity.

Unfortunately, that method had its own drawback—specifically, that building the spacecraft in orbit would require *fifteen* rocket launches. At present, even a single launch was a monumental task. For the government, who had a tight hold on ANSA's purse strings, that was too much. Furthermore, the plan wasn't likely to go down well with the UK citizens whose tax money would ultimately pay for it. Not to mention the fact that an actual orbital rendezvous hadn't yet been tested.

As far as the rocket development team was concerned, however: "We'll build the rockets, and it'll be up to the spacecraft designers to complete the equipment needed to pull off the rendezvous."

Neither side was willing to back down, and both proclaimed their method optimal. To make matters worse, ANSA's HQ Administrator—who presided over the decision—was butting heads with the

government's own scientific advisors about Project Hyperion's budget and direction. The inner workings of Arnack's space program were a complete mess.

"If the UZSR saw how things are behind the scenes, they might declare victory," Kaye said with a wry grin.

"Surely they've got things under better control than we do," Bart agreed.

It was impossible to look behind Zirnitra's Iron Curtain, but Bart imagined that their space program was united under their supreme leader. Although Arnack espoused freedom, that very freedom had left them in a comparative quagmire.

Bart was also uneasy about belonging to the team pushing back against Vil Klaus, whom he'd long looked up to. He aired the thought. "I feel so conflicted about opposing the professor."

When he was just a sickly child, Bart had read everything Klaus published, never missing the man's TV show. The professor's ideas about moon bases and travel between the stars had rendered Bart awestruck. He'd dreamed of one day being a scientist aboard the orbital space station Klaus often proclaimed was key to space exploration. It was thanks to Professor Klaus that Bart had set off on this journey to outer space.

"At the same time," Bart added, "I've still got my doubts about the Earth orbit rendezvous method. It's pretty reckless."

Kaye nodded. "I'm not comfortable with it either. The professor *did* take my thesis very seriously, but that's apples and oranges."

That meant leaving the dilemma in somebody else's hands and waiting on the Galactica's completion.

Watching birds fly through the darkness, Kaye offered her thoughts up toward the moon. "If ANSA doesn't choose a lunar landing method soon, D Room will just keep going in circles."

Outside the two most popular proposals, there were a few other takeoff and landing suggestions, but they'd been ruled out as unrealistic. Some were so bad they were outright delusional.

One such proposal was that—even if ANSA hadn't yet developed a return rocket—the UK could still send astronauts to the moon to achieve "history's first lunar landing." They could then send supplies to

the lunar surface until they *did* develop a return rocket. That idea was, unsurprisingly, struck from consideration.

There was one proposal with true potential among the scrapped ideas, however. It was by no means new or original; the suggestion had been advanced in the 1910s as a means to explore other solar systems. A scientist from a country later known as the UZSR had developed it; it was called the “lunar orbit rendezvous” method.

First, a spacecraft incorporating a command module for astronauts and a lunar lander would launch toward the moon. Once safely in orbit, the astronauts would move into the lunar lander, which would separate from the command module and descend to the moon’s surface. The command module would remain in orbit, circling the moon until the lunar lander’s return.

In terms of budget and technological feasibility, the lunar orbit rendezvous method was theoretically superior to the two ideas the UK was fighting over. They could pull it off using the Chronos rocket they were currently developing, eliminating the need for the Galactica. As for the rendezvous, the lunar orbit’s reduced gravity would make it easier. The lunar lander itself wouldn’t need to be very big either, since the rendezvous point was comparatively close. All told, the lunar orbit rendezvous method ticked all the boxes. It was simpler, less expensive, and viable using only basic systems.

So, why did the UK ignore it? Well, in truth, they didn’t. They had ruled out the lunar orbit rendezvous method due to one glaring weak point: In the event of a dangerous error during an EOR, the distance to send help would be within the Earth’s orbit. The moon, on the other hand, was 380,000 kilometers away.

They were also concerned about autopilot initiating the lunar rendezvous on the far side of the moon. If the astronaut team sent an SOS from there, the control team on Earth would be left watching helplessly as the astronauts perished. The lunar landing was bound to be a global event, so if it ended tragically, manned spaceflight would be as good as obsolete.

The official consensus was simple: “The moon’s too far away for a rendezvous.” ANSA’s board vehemently opposed an LOR, and the government’s scientific advisor stated, “The lunar orbit rendezvous method takes human life far too lightly. The likelihood of safe return is only one percent.”

The “one percent” part had no basis in actual data—it was cut from whole cloth—but rather stemmed from a distrust of automated piloting systems. The bureaucrats deemed the prospect of installing a small computer on a spacecraft unrealistic.

It saddened Bart how little confidence they had in computers. Unfortunately, it was true that there wasn’t enough data to win people over. Many even mocked the idea of computers aboard spacecraft. “Delusional scientists,” they’d say. “Too much science fiction.”

The LOR method appeared in numerous science fiction novels, including Bart and Kaye’s beloved *Fly Me to the Moon*. A very similar method—Mars orbit rendezvous—was featured in a novel written by none other than Professor Klaus. He’d penned the story about a Mars expedition in 1948, not long after the war, following his defection to Arnack and subsequent dispatch to a remote research center.

Nevertheless, Professor Klaus was currently against an LOR. Bart had daydreamed about the method since he was just a boy, but he kept that to himself. He wasn’t in a position to convince anyone to reconsider it.

“If ANSA just learned to cooperate internally, we’d be so much closer to our goal,” he said, listlessly watching the birds overhead.

Kaye sipped her coffee and sighed. “I hope our countries learn to work together somehow.”

The launch of satellites had led to the establishment of space-related nonprofits, which many countries joined. Still, only the UZSR and UK actually had the power to develop rockets. The latter had recently announced that it was prepared to commence cooperative development in two important arenas. First, it would use UK rockets to launch foreign nations’ satellites and data-measurement instruments. Second, it would load its own satellites with foreign data-measurement instruments.

This gesture wasn’t merely supportive—it was a meaningful way for Arnack to improve its reputation and appeal to nations struggling to progress technologically. Consequently, history’s first multinational satellite was being launched as a joint effort between Arnack and the country that had first established the UK as a colony. They had gone to war when Arnack declared independence, but now the nations were allies.

"Space belongs to everyone," Kaye said. "I wish we could work with Zirnitra."

While the possibility of collaboration between the nations still existed, it was extremely slim. Gergiev's congratulatory telegram had hinted at it. In response, the UK had outlined five areas in which the nations could partner to work toward peaceful goals in outer space. Their suggestions included sharing weather satellite data and exchanging findings in space medicine.

Zirnitra had responded positively, stating that they'd asked space development supervisors to prepare concrete plans for cooperative initiatives. The nation never delivered any such plans, however, maintaining its shroud of secrecy regarding space exploration. In truth, it was far too difficult to align on peaceful space projects when space development was tied so closely to military technology. Arnack's government decided that cooperative development was impossible without a disarmament treaty.

"The UZSR's only interested in a treaty insofar as it would improve their image," Bart said. "Unfortunately, a treaty wouldn't carry much weight under those circumstances."

He hated that space development was being used to spread propaganda, although he obviously knew the field's politics weren't always clear and simple. He finished his coffee, acidic bitterness filling his mouth.

"If the UK and UZSR can't even get on the same page about weather satellites, what're the chances of a collaborative lunar landing?" he went on. "Are we daydreaming or just delusional?"

Kaye held a round butter cookie up to the sky. The moonlight lit up the marshlands hidden behind the golden treat.

"From here, the moon looks even smaller than a cookie. Yet somehow, it draws both countries in." A touch of sadness slipped into her voice. "The people starving out there would vastly prefer a cookie to a lunar landing."

Much of the general public still criticized the space program's costliness. Some said the moon was little more than a big rock and that it wasn't worth international conflict.

Holding her cookie "moon" high, Kaye gazed at the sky. Suddenly, grass rustled and wings flapped, startling her. Then a great black

shadow flew straight toward her.

“Huh?!” cried Kaye. “Eek!”

“Whoa!”

The shadow—probably a duck—snatched the cookie from Kaye’s hand and flew into the distance.

Bart managed an “Um...”

He couldn’t move. Kaye clung to him, her eyes shut tight.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulder and chest, she pressed her body into his as if holding on for dear life. Bart’s heart throbbed—not at the sudden duck attack but at Kaye’s sheer proximity. Her hair tickled his lips, and he caught the wafting aroma of her queen of the night flower shampoo.

“Uh, Kaye?” he choked out.

“Hmm?”

“It was just a bird.”

“A bird...?” Kaye thought for a moment, then let out a yelp. She almost fell over as she released Bart, her face bright red all the way to her pointed ears. Brushing cookie crumbs from her fingers, she hung her head. “S-sorry. It was the shock.”

Bart wiped sweat from his brow. “Well, at least it wasn’t an alien attack, right?” he joked.

“Y-yeah, I guess so.”

The two took deep breaths, sitting down again. The air between them filled with awkward silence after the interruption. Bart glanced at Kaye, curious about her reaction to the pause, but she was just pulling up the grass around her.

Then he noticed her hand. “Your finger’s bleeding,” he said.

Kaye hadn’t realized. She looked at her pinky. “It must’ve been that bird.”

Although the cut didn’t seem to bother her, she put her finger to her mouth, casually licking away the blood. Then her eyes met Bart’s, and she yanked her finger away from her mouth, flinching.

“I’m just...licking it, okay?!”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Bart assured her.

Kaye shook her head. “No—I mean, I’m not sucking blood.”

“Oh. Yeah, I know. Humans lick little cuts too.”

“Ah, okay. Phew.” Kaye’s Nosferatu Syndrome had likely made her anxious about Bart’s response. The condition was clearly a thorn in her side, although she didn’t let that show often.

Bart didn’t want to linger on the exchange, so he tried to put their conversation back on track. “Uh...what were we talking about? Cooperative development, right?” He looked at the full moon. “You know, if a UFO armada attacked from space, I bet different countries could work together *then*, couldn’t they?”

“Yeah, probably.” Kaye shuddered. “That’s terrifying, though!”

She really *was* scared of UFOs. Her fear wasn’t particularly unique—lots of people felt that way—but it was rare among Nerd Heaven employees.

“Would the UFOs be cigar-shaped? Or flying saucers?” she mumbled.

The sight of Kaye imagining a war with UFOs tickled Bart’s mischievous streak. He hadn’t expected to see much of anything while UFO spotting, so he’d packed a magazine in case they got bored. He’d picked it because he was sure the feature article would make Kaye’s heart race.

“Have you seen this, Kaye?” Bart casually pulled the magazine from his bag, wondering how she’d react.

“What?”

The moment Kaye saw the cover, she covered her mouth in shock. The magazine’s headlines read “ALIENS HAVE ALREADY INVADED—BEWARE!” and “THE ‘FIREFLIES’ STEVE HOWARD SAW IN SPACE WERE ACTUALLY ALIEN EGGS!” As if that weren’t enough, the cover photo showed an octopus-like alien outstretching a tentacle. Kaye’s eyes widened; she was even more shocked than Bart expected.

“These are just lies to scare kids, y’know?” Bart comforted her, flipping through the pages.

Kaye shook her head vehemently. “You can’t say that for sure!”

“But I mean—look at the photo. It’s got to be fake.”

“They *needed* to fake it, though, because we haven’t identified the

alien species yet. Right?"

"Say what now?"

"Space is limitless. Endless. So, theoretically, that alien could exist. Listen, Bart..." Kaye laid out a mystifying theory she subscribed to. She basically claimed that, if the likelihood of an alien existing wasn't zero percent, then it existed.

"Octopus aliens?" Bart asked once she'd gone pretty deep into the lecture.

"Squid aliens too, yup."

"And green aliens that fire weird lights?"

"Yes. Photosynthesis could cause that color."

"I, uh...I see."

Did Kaye's eidetic memory cause these leaps in logic? When they first discussed the trait, she'd told Bart that her brain sometimes automatically combined memories as it processed them. Now Bart wondered if her memory was blending reality and science fiction, producing otherworldly images and creatures in Kaye's mind. He was no expert; he couldn't say either way. All he knew for certain was that Kaye was terrified of UFOs and aliens.

"I mean, if we're talking *friendly* extraterrestrials, sure, I'd like to meet them," Kaye said. "But I get the shivers thinking about the aliens that might attack us." She curled up like an adorable little armadillo trying to defend itself.

A familiar playful itch snuck up on Bart. "In other words, when it comes to aliens, you hate the type that just stole your cookie."

"Huh?" Kaye lifted her head. "But wasn't that a bird?"

"Actually, it'd be more accurate to call it a...unique luminous body."

"Huh? Uh..."

"I said it was a bird because I thought I'd scare you otherwise."

"You're joking!"

"It might've been a space firefly." Bart adjusted his glasses to hide the grin creeping onto his face. "I think they acquire a blood and skin sample from your pinky. Or maybe they implant eggs."

“Ugh!” Kaye gawked at her pinky finger, her eyes filling with tears. Drawing her lips into a straight line, she squeezed the finger tight with her other hand, as though trying to squeeze out the alien eggs. Blood oozed from the cut.

Uh-oh. I went a step too far.

“I was joking! I was joking!”

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t a space firefly. It was just a plain old duck.”

The tearful glint in Kaye’s eyes suddenly shifted to a glare.
“Bart...”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t think I’d bring you to the verge of tears.”

The dhampir girl’s cheeks puffed out in a pout. “I wasn’t going to cry!”

Oh, no. Now I’ve made her mad.

“Sorry. I got a little carried away.”

“Don’t scare me like that again!”

“Okay, okay. I promise I won’t.”

Kaye didn’t look convinced. “Really?”

“Really! I swear.” He stuck out his pinky toward Kaye.

The gesture took her aback. “Huh?”

“Uh, I’m saying I swear on it,” said Bart. He waggled his finger, trying to pinky swear. Entwining pinkies to make a promise was common in Arnack.

Kaye seemed flustered, however. Bart was only offering to pinky swear, yet she looked suddenly shy and bashful. “You...you want to do that? Like...right here?”

“Well, yeah.”

“But it’s...it’s so sudden.” Kaye pinched her own finger and stared at it.

Bart didn’t really understand what she meant, but he could tell his suggestion bothered her. He lowered his finger. “We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Wait!” Kaye lifted her head again. “O-okay. But let’s keep it a

secret.”

She flushed red all the way down her neck, but her eyes said she'd made up her mind. She took Bart's hand in both of hers.

“Huh?” *What's she doing?*

Kaye lifted Bart's hand to her mouth as if she planned to kiss his pinky.



“Wait! Wait!” Bart pulled his hand back.

Kaye froze. “Huh?”

“What’re you doing?”

She looked puzzled. “What do you mean? We’re swearing a pinky blood oath.”

“Blood oath? I thought we were pinky swearing?” he said, thinking, *We are not on the same page here!*

Kaye thus had to explain the “pinky blood oath” to Bart. It was a way for a dhampir and a human to secretly make a vow. The dhampir’s fangs pierced both their fingers, and they licked the blood to join each other’s bloodlines. Kaye said the blood oath wasn’t connected to Nosferatu Syndrome; it was just a very old dhampir tradition.

“It’s most common among couples who want to marry,” she added.

“Oh, really?”

“Dhampirs and humans aren’t allowed to marry legally, so they do it in secret. That’s why I got so nervous when you suddenly showed me your pinky!”

Bart had never heard of a pinky blood oath before. He was shocked to learn it was essentially a proposal. He’d spent a lot of time with Kaye now, and he liked to think the wall between them was gone, but suddenly he realized there was still tons he didn’t know about dhampir culture and traditions.

“Pinky swearing isn’t a big deal to humans,” he told her. “You just link pinkies and make a promise, and that’s that.”

“Oh.” Kaye fidgeted, touching her cheeks. “I really got the wrong idea, didn’t I?”

Bart wasn’t sure what to say. “Well, how about we try it? The human pinky swear, I mean.”

Kaye nodded, still blushing. “All right. Let’s.”

“So, uh, first hold out your pinky finger,” Bart explained, extending his own.

Just then, something behind him caught Kaye’s eye. “Whoa! Is that a UFO?! ”

“Huh?” Turning to look where Kaye pointed, Bart saw a single light blaze through the sky at high speed. “I think that’s a—” Taking a longer look, he realized what they were peering at. “Oh. I guess it’s just a fighter jet.”

“Not a UFO?”

“Well, the air force base is over that way.”

“Oh. Right.” Kaye heaved a sigh that was somehow both relieved and disappointed.

It’d gotten dark, and would only get darker. It was already easy to mistake a plane for a UFO; soon, they’d never be able to distinguish them. It was also approaching the time when dangerous nocturnal reptiles—not to mention the even more dangerous Solar Flare Club—emerged from hiding. Staying out much longer wasn’t a good idea.

“I guess we should head home,” said Bart.

“Uh-huh,” Kaye agreed. Then she smiled apologetically, adding, “Thanks for coming along today, Bart.”

Although they hadn’t seen any UFOs, Bart had enjoyed his day off. As they folded the blanket they’d brought, he and Kaye watched another fighter jet flash across the sky.

He had lived in Laika Crescent for a year now, and the air force base was more active than ever. All that activity had begun the previous year, when Arnack launched a surprise attack on a neighboring nation they’d dubbed Imprisoned Island. He hoped it was nothing to be anxious about.

Bart only realized after arriving home that the fighter jet had stopped him from pinky swearing with Kaye.

“Oh well,” he muttered dejectedly, holding out the finger. “A pinky blood oath, huh?”

If I hadn’t stopped her, would she have bitten me?

He closed his eyes and pictured Kaye blushing, her cute mouth nearing his finger. He saw her lips purse around it and her fangs pierce it. Imaginary pain shot through his hand. His eyes flew open, and he looked at his pinky again, wondering how it would’ve felt if Kaye really *had* bitten it. Since the oath meant licking each other’s blood, he would’ve put Kaye’s tender white finger to his mouth and tasted her blood too. The thought gave Bart goosebumps and made him tremble.

He brought his pinky to his own mouth and bit it gently, but without fangs to pierce it, he drew no blood. Then he caught his reflection in the window and let out a chuckle.

“Bart, what the heck are you doing?”

Vermilion Eyes

THREE NIGHTS after going UFO spotting with Bart, Kaye came home from work to find her father slumped on the living room sofa.

“I’m home,” she said.

Dominic only responded with a silent frown. Was he angry that she’d come home late? That she wasn’t able to make dinner? *That can’t be right. Dad supports my work at the Manned Spacecraft Center. It’s got to be something else. Maybe something happened to him at work?*

Kaye racked her brains, then froze completely the second she saw the book by Dominic’s side—it was a novel she’d been reading in secret.

“Wait,” she blurted out, a chill running down her spine. *But how?! I hid that book!*

Now she knew the cause of Dominic’s bad mood: a human romance novel without a single mention of dhampirs. Before, Kaye exclusively read books about space and science, including Professor Vil Klaus’s whole body of works. She’d only recently decided to try a romance novel.

It all started with the pinky swear. When she thought back to how she’d almost bitten Bart’s finger, she felt her cheeks flush. Telling herself she’d never make the same mistake again, she’d picked up the romance novel to help her understand humans better. Now that it was in her father’s hands, however, she was lost for words.

Dominic glared. “You’ve been reading *this*?”

This is all a misunderstanding. I just need to clear the air.

“Please don’t jump to conclusions. It’s for studying.”

“Studying what? Love?”

Admittedly, it didn’t help Kaye’s case that the novel’s title was

Lessons of Love.

“No, not that!” Kaye scrambled to rationalize her choice. “The ‘lessons’ in the title are actually piano lessons! The book’s about a piano teacher who’s drafted into the army and his student who wants to be a pianist...”

Dominic pointed at the blurb on the book’s back cover. “And they elope?”

Kaye didn’t know what else to say.

“You haven’t fallen for some human, have you?” demanded Dominic. “Don’t tell me it’s that kid with glasses. What’s his name again? Bart?”

Kaye’s body heated up as Dominic uttered the name. “No, it’s not,” was all she managed.

Her father grew even more suspicious. “Kaye.”

“No! You’ve got this all wrong! That was a bookstore recommendation! I’m just reading it to pass time in D Room! Anyway, what’re you doing going through *my* stuff and leafing through *my* books?!?”

“You left it in the bathroom.”

“Huh?”

“It was in the corner!”

The novel in Dominic’s hand looked to be damaged from moisture and humidity. Staring at it, Kaye searched her memory. She remembered taking the book into the bathroom and being engrossed in it, but not leaving with it. *I must’ve just left it in there!* Goosebumps sprang up all over her body.

Dominic glared. “Is this Expo you’re going to really for work?” he asked, waving the book in the air.

“Of course! Now give me my book back!” Swiping it from her father’s hand, Kaye darted into her room in a flash.

There, she completely lost track of time, floating in innocent, pure, bittersweet love. She wiped her eyes, puffy from tears, as dawn peeked over the horizon.

I’m so glad it had a happy ending. There were many differences between humans and dhampirs, but when it came to love, their

emotions were identical. Kaye felt she now understood pinky swears.

“Time to turn in,” she murmured, falling back into bed and closing her eyes.

Work was just a few hours away, yet sleep refused to come. Picturing herself as the novel’s heroine, Kaye wondered whether Bart ever read romances. If he hadn’t read this one, she wanted to lend it to him; if he had, she wanted to discuss it.

Until recently, Kaye’s head had been stuffed full of outer space and mathematical formulas. More and more, however, she found herself thinking of Bart. He’d saved her. He’d accepted her Nosferatu Syndrome. He was always happy to help with her science lessons for local children.

After her mother died, Kaye hid away her dreams. Telling herself that she despised the moon, she’d lived life feeling utterly alone. It left a gaping hole in her heart. Thanks to Bart, that hole seemed to have healed. Kaye wanted to talk with him and learn more about him. She’d never felt that way about someone before.

“He’d probably just find me annoying.”

Bart accepted her invitation to go UFO spotting, and then nothing had happened, so Kaye had basically wasted his day off. He probably had other things he’d wanted to do. She couldn’t just drag him wherever she liked. He was her coworker—she had to show some restraint. Still, she was glad he’d agreed to come.

“I wonder how he feels?” she said, touching her pinky fingertip. “Pinky swears, huh?”

Curious about how the vow felt, she entwined her pinkies, but it just sent a needle into her heart. Making a promise to herself was pointless and empty. She hated that she’d let the light of the fighter jet in the sky distract her. If not for that, she and Bart could’ve done it.

She wondered if it would be strange to request that he pinky swear at the Manned Spacecraft Center. How would he react if she held out her finger and quietly asked when they were alone after work in the resource room? When she tried to imagine it, all she saw was Bart looking bewildered.

“Yeah, no.” It would just be too embarrassing.

Kaye tousled her hair in frustration. A jumble of feelings spun

through her mind. Spacing out and leaving a book in her bathroom was one thing, but she couldn't afford to do anything weird at work.

That's enough! she told herself. *Time to get some rest.* "Good night!" she muttered, hiding under her blanket.

Try as she might, however, Kaye couldn't stop dreaming of attending the Expo with Bart, her imagination weaving moments just like *Lessons of Love*'s dating scenes.

She didn't sleep a wink.

"You went UFO spotting with Bart?!" Mia shouted into Kaye's ear.

Kaye gasped in shock, almost spilling her coffee. Mia had popped up out of nowhere, but her question startled Kaye even more so. "How did you know?!" she cried.

I didn't tell anyone! Wait...did I say something about it while I was distracted?

"Bart told me."

"Oh. So, that's how." Kaye didn't mind that Mia knew she'd gone UFO spotting, but she was a little embarrassed that the other woman realized Bart had accompanied her.

Mia stared at her. "Why so flustered, Kaye?"

Kaye struggled to keep her cool. "I'm not flustered."

"It's not that I care. Well, as long as this doesn't affect work."

"Of course it won't."

"Oh, no? Well then, please go right ahead and forget work when you enjoy the Expo."

Kaye looked away. "The Expo *is* work. That's why we're going!"

Bringing her face close to Kaye's, Mia scrutinized her senior very carefully, as though looking for programming errors. "How much of the Expo is work?" she asked, voice full of doubt and suspicion.

"All of it!" Kaye's throat felt suddenly dry from stress. She swallowed a mouthful of coffee. "Urk!" The coffee's ketchup-and-

pepper-sauce flavor was like an electric current zapping her brain. She coughed at the horrid taste, glaring at Mia through her tears. “Mia...”

Mia, however, remained expressionless. She pointed to the clock. “That’s punishment for taking an extra-long break.”

“Extra-long?!” Kaye looked at the clock. She’d been on her break for an extra ten minutes. The last thing she remembered was taking the first sip of her coffee and daydreaming about the Expo exhibits.

Mia held out a water glass she’d filled in advance. “It looks to me like this *is* affecting your work.”

“N-now, hang on a minute. I just... I probably just dozed off.”

“I’ll cover things as your temp manager while you’re away at the Expo. So, like I said, you just go right ahead and forget about work. Enjoy yourself.”

“I just told you, Mia. The Expo is work.”

As Kaye gulped her water down, a cheeky grin crawled onto Mia’s face, as if she saw right through to Kaye’s feelings for Bart. The water in Kaye’s stomach felt heavy. At least she knew D Room would be in good hands while she was away.

Chapter 3: Rulers

Queen's Eyes

NEWS FROM ZIRNITRA arrived like a nightmare jolting Arnack from its peaceful slumber. The nation had achieved the first space rendezvous in history. *“Two spacecraft have come within five kilometers of each other while orbiting Earth,”* the UZSR’s National Broadcasting Service had announced.

The Zirnitra Union had also achieved the first-ever television broadcast from space, and the grainy footage was of cosmonaut Roza Plevitskaya—humankind’s first female cosmonaut. Three historical achievements, all at once.

A tremor ran through Arnack. ANSA’s own orbital rendezvous technology was still in the planning stages. It was crucial to the success of the Earth orbit rendezvous method, but it would also be essential for the construction of space stations. If the UZSR had already surpassed them in that field, it essentially gave the nation reign over the heavens above.

Soon enough, a report on these successes made its way to the royal palace and Queen Sundancia. While reading it as part of her public duties, she stopped to ask her royal secretary about something that bothered her. “I wish to know more about our nation’s space program. Could you tell me how it’s going?”

The royal secretary’s eyebrow twitched. “Your Majesty, that issue doesn’t warrant your concern at present. If you sincerely wish to study, might I suggest you start with governance and diplomacy instead of astronautics?”

“But will I not be attending the upcoming conference? Surely I should have at least a baseline understanding of—”

“You shall attend as an observer, Your Majesty. You won’t need to take part in discussions. As for your opening and closing remarks, fear not. Those will be prepared for you.”

In his polite but stoic way, he rebuffed her wishes. Sundancia knew she wouldn't get any further with him.

The royal secretary checked the clock. "Well, it's almost time for you to meet the prime minister."

Sundancia met Arnack's prime minister once a week. Today, they would discuss nuclear weapons testing. The prime minister was a man nearing his sixties with a dignified beard and a noble air. He always spoke in an even and intellectual manner, however terrifying his reports themselves were.

"You must understand, nuclear weapons are essential to deter aggression and potential attacks," he told the queen.

Ever since the Great War ended, more and more nations were equipping themselves with nuclear weapons. At this point, the whole Earth would be annihilated in the event of nuclear war. Global discussions on the subject of preventing nuclear proliferation took place, but military armament continued unabated. The UK and UZSR had met the previous summer to discuss bringing things down a notch but hadn't gone as far as banning tests of nuclear weapons.

In light of that, the UZSR had completed fifty atmospheric nuclear tests. They'd already developed what could well be history's most terrifying weapon: Andrei, a hydrogen bomb with destructive capability extending over a fifty-kilometer radius.

The United Kingdom ran its own underground tests in response. They planned to transition to sea-based tests at the end of April, expecting to conduct over one hundred tests in that environment.

"I realize the importance of deterrence," said Sundancia, clearly troubled. "Still..."

The prime minister was essentially respectful of her worries, but he wasn't about to fold. "These are our final tests. I too hope for future military disarmament."

"Very well, then."

Having acquired Sundancia's agreement, the prime minister excused himself and left. Since the queen was the UK's monarch, she held what was known as "royal prerogative." That gave her power over diplomacy and defense decisions. However, reporting such choices to the queen had become little more than a formality. The monarch was

also strictly forbidden to discuss politics in public, and the UK's Cabinet handled all political decisions.

Sundancia had the right to caution the government against decisions, but they were generally made by "the Brightest," an elite national think tank. Before the Brightest, Sundancia felt tiny. She didn't dare speak without fully understanding what she was talking about, lest she draw their ire. Given the members' extensive track records, Sundancia trusted them when they sent important documents requiring her signature. She didn't understand everything she received, and sometimes had doubts, yet she signed without question.

Nevertheless, Sundancia couldn't shake the feeling that the UK was moving in the wrong direction. Her knowledge of government was limited, but she could at the very least tell right from wrong.

In particular, she didn't support dispatching Arnack's troops to other nations. A year earlier, the military had moved to occupy Imprisoned Island, causing three hundred casualties on either side of the conflict. The global criticism of Arnack afterward had been very harsh.

Sundancia had been hurt terribly by the news, since she approved the military action. Before that wound even started to heal, however, a war broke out far from the UK's borders. The Royal Army, which the queen nominally commanded, engaged in battle.

If nuclear attacks began, what would happen to the world? All-out nuclear war was no joke; it was a potential global crisis. Schools and workplaces ran evacuation drills, and many households had their own underground bunkers.

Sundancia's heart plummeted into darkness at the thought of an Earth bereft of life. But since she wasn't in a position to suggest nuclear deterrence, she signed her approval, believing in the Brightest and her royal secretary.

Some 3,700 kilometers west of the royal palace, the 21st Century Expo opened in a spectacular fashion in Marine City on April 23. The day after the opening ceremonies, a chapel near the palace held its

annual Easter service. Since the entire royal family gathered for the occasion, the streets nearby were always packed with people.

As Sundancia was the head of Arnack's Solar Church, she received a warm welcome from the chapel priest in charge of the service. Local kindergarteners presented her with flowers.

The queen smiled, kneeling to look the children in the eye as she accepted the bouquets. "Thank you!" The kindergarteners stood as straight as they could, beaming back.

Among the children was a lone dhampir boy. He tried to hand his bouquet to Sundancia, only to trip on the stone stairs. "Oops!" The flowers fell to one side. It looked as though the boy had hurt his knee.

She reached out, asking, "Are you all right?"

The boy looked at her hand but stood on his own.

Sundancia felt suddenly awkward. She picked up the dropped bouquet. "Thank you for the flowers," she said, hoping to cheer the boy up.

Instead, he bit his lip, and tears began running down his face.

"Oh..." Sundancia felt suddenly lost. *What should I do? Say something? Hold his hand? Pat his head? Hug him?*

She looked at her royal secretary, who waited to one side. The secretary gave her a silent, solemn nod. Sundancia didn't know exactly what it meant, but it seemed like a warning to avoid further aggravating the issue of anti-dhampir discrimination.

The royal secretary wasn't advising her to discriminate but rather to keep her own safety in mind. The last time Sundancia took a stance supportive of dhampirs, someone left a dead bat in front of the palace. It was believed to be the work of the Solar Flare Club, but no culprit was ever found.

Even outside the dhampir issue, the queen's views were immensely influential. Depending on the side she aligned herself with, some might resort to gunshots—that was her royal secretary's true concern. He'd been with the ruling family for decades, since the reign of Sundancia's father, and his sole desire was to protect the throne and the family upon it. Sundancia was nothing but grateful to the man, who'd rightfully earned his knighthood.

Yet as she looked at the dhampir boy standing in front of her,

crying, she felt the chains of her position weigh her down.

The nuclear tests at sea made big news. Even the TV news anchors were a touch cynical in their reports. *“While the crowds go wild at the 21st Century Expo, let me make one prediction. Arnack won’t rule the twenty-first century, and neither will the Zirnitra Union. The rulers of the future will be the cockroaches that survive the inevitable nuclear fallout.”*

Although morbid, the joke drew laughter and applause from the other panelists. Sundancia, watching the news in the royal office, didn’t find it funny in the slightest. She took a break from her evening duties and headed to the garden with Kukushka and four puppies. The queen yearned to clear her head and spend some time alone. Fortunately, she was always permitted on these strolls by herself.

The royal palace’s spacious green boasted a flowing stream and beautiful flower garden. Sundancia sat on a bench, surrounding herself with colorful flowers. It felt like their scent was healing her soul.

“All right. Go play, guys,” she said, loosing the puppies onto the grass. Only Kukushka remained. She lay by Sundancia’s side on the bench, as always.

The queen began reading a draft of her remarks for the upcoming conference. She’d received the document just before she left for her walk. ANSA’s Office of Public Information had written the speech alongside the government’s science advisor. It was about five minutes long and mostly extolled the virtues of space development. In short, it was meant to convince the general public that the space program was worth its cost.

In that sense, the remarks were less a speech and more a plea. Sundancia understood why—ANSA’s budget was going to waste at the moment. Just days ago, the UK had launched a fourth moon probe, which had collided with the lunar surface and sustained heavy damage. That caused issues with the probe’s radio transmissions, so it was a failure, although some did claim Arnack had now reached the moon first.

Such disasters were unfortunate, but they didn’t bother Sundancia

as much as the constant insistence upon victory in the Space Race. She was beginning to think that winning and losing no longer mattered; she was tired of the rivalry. Wasn't it enough to reach the moon? Did it matter who got there first?

She knew, however, that voicing such thoughts in public would only draw ire. Sundancia decided to read the remarks she'd been given. The last thing she wanted was for her own careless comments to cause Project Hyperion to be scrapped. She supported the space program and longed for its success from the bottom of her heart. Her real life as queen of Arnack was oppressive, and only daydreams of space—trips to the moon and interstellar travel!—excited her.

Acting on her emotions would spark criticism and rumors that she was unfit for her position. For now, all she could do was support ANSA's project by staying out of its way. She hoped she'd once again see the joyous, smiling faces of ANSA personnel basking in success, just as she had at the ceremony commemorating the orbital flight last fall.

ANSA's staff were working hard to reach such a difficult goal. It saddened Sundancia that their efforts were disparaged more than anything else. Compared to the UK's military expenditures, ANSA used a negligible sum of taxpayer money. The country poured funds into military satellites, and although manned spaceflight's actual benefits were few and far between, Sundancia would've much preferred to see more money put toward astronautics.

"But that... Well, that's probably impossible, isn't it, Kukushka?"

Kukushka gave her a blank stare.

"Space doesn't belong to anyone," Sundancia said. "I certainly wish we didn't need to fight over it."

She looked down at her remarks once more. The words were like gently whispered hopes and dreams that glossed over all ANSA's failures to convince the public to stay on board. It was the queen of Arnack's responsibility to deliver the speech.

"Arrrgh!" Sundancia felt frustrated and disappointed. Tears welled in her eyes. As she read the lies that peppered the speech, her tears refused to stop falling. They landed on the back of her hand, where Kukushka licked them.

"I can't do it. I'm no queen."

It hurt to have to reply to all the letters she received from around the world. It pained her to put on a smile whenever she went out. She'd wished she could quit so many times. If giving up her crown had been an option, she would've taken it.

"No. I can't be so irresponsible."

Sundancia wiped away her tears, looking up at the sky. Stars glittered in the distance.

"I wonder what'd happen if I were abducted by aliens?" she asked in a voice no louder than a whisper.

Nothing would change, was the response she imagined in Kukushka's big, adorable eyes.

Star Eyes

THE UK GOVERNMENT'S TOP BRASS and leading scientists met in a conference room at ANSA's headquarters to discuss news and tactics regarding the Zirnitra Union.

"Let me state conclusively," said Professor Klaus, his voice full of confidence, "that the so-called rendezvous claimed by the UZSR is exaggerated—in fact, a lie."

His team had analyzed the available data and determined that it didn't add up.

"The Union's two parallel spacecraft slowly drifted apart. Furthermore, their speeds differed," the professor continued. "There was no sign of either spacecraft correcting its orbit. It was no rendezvous at all. The Union merely timed its launches to *look* like one."

"You're saying their chief designer used smoke and mirrors?" The prime minister held his head in his hands.

Klaus chuckled. "Since the Union fabricated its claim, we believe a rendezvous is still impossible at present. And Zirnitra still hasn't tested large rockets capable of reaching the moon. Our best guess is that they're also struggling with budget issues."

Investigations into the Union's current economic situation didn't suggest that they could pull off a project as costly as a lunar landing. Gergiev had declared that the UZSR would reach the moon in the "near future," but authorities in Arnack believed that was merely an intimidation tactic meant to confuse the UK and to goad it into hasty decisions and costly mistakes. Individuals in Arnack's government had called Gergiev "inconsistent," "big-mouthed," and "a subjectivist dogmatist." Still, it was ultimately impossible to know what he was thinking.

ANSA's Administrator voiced another concern: "The Union's congratulatory telegram mentioned 'combining our technologies and resources in joint cooperation.' Was that perhaps because they're afraid we'll enjoy another unforeseen success?"

"Whatever they're thinking," the prime minister replied, "we must reach the moon first. The Space Race will decide the world's future. If we don't win, fear will blanket outer space *and* the Earth."

Scientists saw dreams in the depths of space, whereas the government and military saw monsters. They saw satellites equipped with nuclear warheads, battleships orbiting Earth, and lunar bases for nuclear missiles.

The UZSR's secrecy provoked uncertainty and anxiety in Arnack. The UK was already covertly developing satellite countermeasures—electromagnetic waves that would neutralize enemy satellites. None of what they feared was currently possible, however. There had been no conflicts in space yet. So far, Space Race clashes had consisted merely of arrogant superpowers risking their pride.

"At any rate, it is true that the UK is falling behind in terms of exploring space. What are our plans for space development moving forward, Professor Klaus?"

Klaus had come to Arnack as a refugee. He'd once been relegated to a distant research facility, but now he was essential to the national space program. At this point, fewer people labeled him a war criminal for his previous work developing ballistic missiles.

"We must establish space rendezvous technology as quickly as possible," Klaus said. "Lunar landing aside, that technology will be indispensable to all future space development."

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the man, and together, they

pledged to defeat the Zirnitra Union. After the prime minister ended the meeting, the attendees broke into private conversations.

“Should the UK name cargo ships after astronauts, like the Union did?”

“You mean like the *Aaron Fifield* or the *Steve Howard*? ”

“Idiot. Imagine if they sank? What would the public say?”

This easygoing chitchat was shattered by the arrival of a confidential report from the Department of Defense’s intelligence division: “We received an emergency message from our asset in Sangrad.”

The asset in question was an active colonel in the UZSR’s main intelligence office. Tiring of his country’s deceptions, he’d decided to cooperate with Arnack. He risked his life to send his reports, which included secret documents photographed with a miniature camera. The reports were incredibly useful, since they granted the UK a peek behind the Iron Curtain.

“What is it this time?” the prime minister asked jokingly. “You better not tell me the Union managed to land on the moon!”

Dry laughter bounced off the walls of the room.

Chapter 4: The 21st Century Expo

Blue Eyes

APRIL 5, 1962, was both the anniversary of Aaron Fifield's suborbital flight and the day Lev Leps and Irina Luminesk landed in Eastern Arnack. Since their individual spaceflights, Lev and Irina had been busy on their world tour. The UK was their nineteenth stop. Their party in Arnack consisted of twelve people invited by Zirnitra's embassy, including attendants from the air force, a Delivery Crew security detail, and an official photographer.

Zirnitra was Arnack's rival in the Space Race, but Lev and Irina were popular worldwide. A parade marked their arrival, and UK citizens and local news crew alike gushed at the sight of the two cosmonauts riding through the streets in a convertible.

Bart, Kaye, and the D Room team watched Lev and Irina on TV.

"It feels like they arrived on the anniversary of Aaron's flight on purpose," Bart said with a wry grin.

Everyone agreed that the Union certainly seemed to want to overshadow Arnack's achievement. National rivalry aside, however, Lev was one of Bart's biggest heroes. Bart had hoped to watch the parade in person but was too far away for a day trip.

"I wonder if Arnack One will get to meet the cosmonauts as a PR stunt," he mused.

Kaye nodded, eyes glimmering with hope.

Bart already had a hunch that, if they *did* meet, he'd do what he always did—freeze and lose his ability to speak.

The cameras followed Lev and Irina to their hotel, where they were received by Arnack's prime minister, his associates, and Aaron Fifield. The local dignitaries exchanged handshakes with the cosmonauts in a show of camaraderie, and a press conference quickly followed.

Lev delivered his opening comment with an easygoing grin. “*I am very happy to have the opportunity to meet and get to know the people of this country.*”

Irina’s fangs peeked from her sweet smile. “*It is only a short stay, but I look forward to visiting your cities and enjoying your nation’s beautiful nature.*”

The two went on praising the United Kingdom of Arnack. It might just have been lip service, but still, Bart was happy to hear it.

“*The two cosmonauts are friendly and laid-back. Very different from our image of the Zirnitra Union,*” an onsite reporter noted.

Of the cosmonauts’ retinue, however, a Delivery Crew agent made the strongest impression on Bart. She radiated impenetrability. Although Irina and Lev’s opening remarks were warm and relaxed, the agent interrupted like a cold wind as the media began to address them.

“*The cosmonauts won’t answer any questions regarding our nation’s technology,*” she warned.

Lev and Irina responded to every inquiry in a diplomatic, noncommittal fashion. If someone posed a tough question, the Delivery Crew agent answered on their behalf.

“Whoa. They’re being censored,” Bart said.

The D Room team members nodded.

“It’s just like their book,” Kaye chimed in, feeling sympathetic as she watched the press conference.

A series of newspaper articles Lev and Irina had written were collated and published as a book entitled *The Journey to Space*. Its contents, however, consisted largely of praise for the Zirnitra Union. Most of *The Journey to Space*’s technological details were also far-fetched. It seemed ironic that the articles had originally been published in a newspaper called *The Istina*, which meant “truth.” All the same, *The Journey to Space* was among Bart’s favorites—alongside *Fly Me to the Moon*—for its description of spaceflight.

The press conference continued. The questions and answers were mostly superficial, but one reporter did ask, “*When will the UZSR reach the moon?*”

“*In 1967,*” said Lev.

“Or perhaps sooner,” added Irina.

The reporters buzzed with excitement. That was the same year Arnack had declared its target. This was an announcement of sorts—the UZSR accepted the UK’s challenge.

After the press conference, Lev and Irina were scheduled to travel across Arnack, stopping at various locations to speak on the topic of “preparing for space travel.”

As the conference ended, Lev remarked, *“It is truly unfortunate that our nation will not participate in the 21st Century Expo. However, I look forward to seeing you all there.”*

Once the conference officially wrapped up, the TV screen showed the cosmonauts’ schedule.

Mia whistled. “They’ll be at the Expo the same time as you two.”

“May 13. You’re right,” Bart said.

He and Kaye shared a puzzled look. Then they heard the newscaster announce, *“Good news! The Expo conference will feature Leps and Luminesk as special guests!”*

Jennifer called Bart and Kaye to the PR office, where she explained that the Expo conference events would include a discussion of “cooperative development.”

“The UZSR put in a last-minute request, so this all came together very quickly,” she told them. “But you won’t just meet Lev and Irina at the conference. You’ll accompany them the day before too.”

Jennifer made it sound like this was just another day at the office, but Bart’s heart pounded with excitement. “What do you mean by ‘accompany them’?”

“You’ll tour the Expo pavilions with them and eat dinner together at a five-star hotel.”

It was much more than Bart had expected, but his fear outweighed his excitement. Kaye, on the other hand, looked delighted. “I can’t wait! I’ve always wanted to talk with Irina.”

Their reactions were like oil and water. Jennifer took a moment to gaze at the pair, then added calmly, “Please be sure to brush up on your table manners. After all, the queen will be dining with you.”

Did she say “the queen”? Bart was certain he misheard. Even Kaye was gaping in surprise.

“I knew she was attending the conference...but we’re having dinner with her?” Bart gasped. “Really?”

“We need to paint a portrait of peaceful global space development,” Jennifer replied. “Just picture it—two Zirnitran cosmonauts, two Arnackian engineers, and Queen Sundancia, all enjoying a meal.”

The idea had obviously come from the government. They were likely looking for a way to cover up their failed lunar probe and recent nuclear tests.

“Guess we’ve got no choice, then,” said Bart.

Doing his best to calm his nerves, he thought of all the good aspects of the 21st Century Expo. Work was sending him there with Kaye. He got to stay in a five-star hotel. He’d have dinner with two global heroes *and* the queen. And the icing on the cake was that he’d speak at a conference alongside his childhood idol, Professor Klaus.

Could a man ask for anything more? Wiping his sweaty palms on his pant legs, Bart told himself that the answer was no.

Marine City, the site of the 21st Century Expo, was on Arnack’s west coast. Westward expansion had ended here in the nineteenth century, and the ocean stretched out endlessly beyond this point. Greenery surrounded the beautiful seaside location.

The city buzzed with a festive atmosphere, and the streets were full of souvenir shops and “space” merchandise. There were replica rockets, colorful planet-shaped cookies, and a bevy of other goods. Right now, this was the only place in the world where people could experience the twenty-first century before it arrived.

Supposedly, the Expo would draw a whopping ten million visitors

over six months. Numerous movers and shakers were set to visit, including movie stars, musicians, royal families, foreign princes, and even the founder of a famous animation studio. Among those celebrity visitors were Bart and Kaye.

The Arnack One team spent the night in a five-star hotel frequented by government officials. The next day, their security detail led them to a monorail that connected directly to the Expo grounds. The train weaved between buildings as if soaring through the sky.

Kaye pointed out the window excitedly, crying, “Look! The Space Tower!”

The Expo landmark was a tower—one hundred eighty meters tall—pointing to the stars. There was an eye-catching round observation platform atop it. The platform’s design made it look as though a UFO had landed on the tower.

Bart couldn’t contain his excitement. “It’s like something out of a science fiction movie!”

“This is way more like the twenty-first century than I expected!” Kaye exclaimed.

“Look, I don’t mind that you’re excited.” Jennifer sounded like a schoolteacher reining in two overly excited students. “Just don’t forget you’re here for work.”

Jennifer’s comment yanked Bart back to reality. He’d been completely in sightseeing mode.

She exchanged a grin with the *Living Illustrated* photographer, then added, “That said, go enjoy yourselves. Genuine smiles make for better publicity shots anyhow. Just don’t go overboard, and don’t offend the cosmonauts.”

“Got it!”

Bart and Kaye were scheduled to meet Lev and Irina that evening; their schedule was designed to accommodate Irina’s sensitivity to sunlight. Until then, the pair were free to explore the pavilions.

Still, Bart was already nervous, right down to the pit of his stomach. He couldn’t stop thinking about how to act in front of his heroes. *I’m actually meeting them in person!* He was so worried, he’d barely slept a wink the previous night.

“Did you sleep okay, Kaye?”

“Like a rock.”

“Really?”

“Yes, compared to how I sleep at home. That hotel bed felt like heavenly clouds. I lay there deciding what to talk to Lev and Irina about, and before I knew it, I drifted off.”

Kaye’s strong heart never ceased to amaze Bart.

The flags of all the countries participating in the Expo fluttered in the air. The cloudless blue sky was like the promise of a bright future. People from around the world jam-packed the Expo grounds; there were even some dhampirs among them. In front of the main gates, a traveling carnival—the Amusement Zone—commanded attention with its glimmering star decorations and meteor-inspired roller coaster.

As soon as Bart and Kaye stepped onto the Expo grounds, they were swarmed by crowds. Their arrival seemed to produce an impromptu meet-and-greet.

“Can I get your autograph?!”

“May I shake your hand?!”

Foreign visitors who weren’t used to dhampirs peered at Kaye, openly curious and surprised. Kids pointed, remarking on her red eyes and pointed ears. Whatever their reactions, Kaye maintained her warm smile, waving kindly. The gesture set everyone around her at ease.

As they walked through the crowd, shaking hands and signing autographs, a chubby little boy with a bag of planet-shaped cookies grabbed hold of them to declare his dreams for the future. “One day, I’m gonna join ANSA!”

Bart saw his younger self in the boy with a passionate glimmer in his eye. He’d looked up to the rocket scientist Vil Klaus and fallen in love with dreams of science fiction. He had already built and launched his own compact satellites before he even joined ANSA.

“How old are you?” Bart asked.

“Ten! I’m in my school’s space club! And I like computers!”

“Wow! That’s great! I’m looking forward to seeing you join our ranks.” Bart wished he and Kaye could talk to the boy longer, but there just wasn’t time.

Between signing autographs, he leaned over to Kaye. “We need to make sure we’re engineering role models for these kids.”

“Yes. We’ve been trusted with a very important mission.” Kaye’s brow furrowed for a moment before she broke into a giggle.

The 21st Century Expo’s main site consisted of four separate “worlds.” The first was the World of the 21st Century, which offered visitors a hands-on experience with the high-tech future. The second was the World of Commerce and Industry, full of a range of exhibits produced by domestic businesses and foreign enterprises. The third was the World of Entertainment, which housed the Expo’s shows and attractions. The last was the World of Science, which displayed ANSA projects and contained a government-funded museum.

“Let’s start with the World of the 21st Century,” Jennifer suggested.

She led Bart and Kaye into the huge, four-cornered tent measuring about a hundred and fifty meters across. Half the tent was devoted to the “Tour of the Future” exhibit, which offered several fun, hands-on experiences. A line stretched from the entrance, but as special guests, Bart and Kaye were entitled to express entry.

“This is a bit awkward,” Bart said.

“It feels like cutting in line,” Kaye agreed.

Fortunately, nobody queuing seemed to mind as Bart and Kaye passed, apologizing the whole way. In fact, they seemed to relish the appearance of the so-called “heroes on the ground.”

“Hey!” cried a voice from the line. “Take me to the moon with you! Please!”

The rest of the line burst out laughing. Bart and Kaye smiled awkwardly, giving thumbs-ups. They hoped that, by the twenty-first century, ANSA would’ve gotten much, much farther than the moon.

Inside, Bart and Kaye were ready to experience the Tour of the Future. They'd ride the "bubblelevator"—a portmanteau of "bubble" and "elevator." It was a round vehicle that used light refraction technology to project rainbows on its transparent acrylic walls. Thanks to the floaty synthesizer soundtrack playing over its speakers, riding the bubblelevator felt like jumping into a time machine.

"It's like a giant soap bubble," Kaye said in wonder, tracing a rainbow with her finger.

"It'd sure be fun if the Manned Spacecraft Center used these," Bart said, although he wondered whether people in the twenty-first century would really ride "bubblelevators."

The first stop on the bubblelevator's journey was a city of the future, which showcased everyday life in the twenty-first century. People would travel to work via personal helicopter, eliminating traffic jams and packed trains. Domed factories would allow them to cultivate vegetables even in the desert, as well as harvest and prepare plankton for consumption. Food shortages would no longer be a concern.

Manufacturers would phase out chimneys and exhaust pipes, and transportation would be completely electric, since that was environmentally friendly. Bart peeked into a display factory in which human and dhampir dolls happily worked side by side. The sight would've enraged the Solar Flare Club.

A vehicle manufacturer involved in rocket development had designed a car boasting a fighter jet's wings and cockpit. They called the space-age concept vehicle the "air car."

"This is *so* cool! Kaye, look! It's even got a control stick, like a plane. And the brakes work on air resistance!" The vehicle's aerodynamic design completely fascinated Bart. It seemed to him that the company might mass-produce the air car even *before* the twenty-first century.

Kaye giggled at his boyish excitement. "You're really just a kid at heart, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Would you like to ride it?"

"Well, I mean..." Bart muttered. Suddenly embarrassed, he cleared his throat, putting on his most professional PR face. "Umm...I

do think it makes wonderful use of space development technology.”

Kaye, however, kept giggling at Bart’s overexcitement.

“Wh-what?” Bart asked.

“Nothing, really,” she responded, stifling her laughter.

Bart noticed Jennifer and their photographer grinning in much the same way as Kaye. “Well, let’s keep moving!” He hurried to the next exhibit, embarrassment powering his footsteps.

Next up was a high-tech house of the future, an exhibit full of amazing ideas for the twenty-first century’s shifting lifestyles. The house was equipped with a vacuum system to keep dust at bay. Its furniture consisted of plastic and reinforced paper—“No longer bound by gravity!” the exhibit proclaimed. The completely wireless kitchen allowed for solar-powered cooking. If the house’s inhabitants tired of its color scheme, they could change it with the flick of a switch.

Bart glanced at Kaye, who seemed totally focused on an explanatory signboard. He wondered if she was ignoring her PR duties in order to memorize the sign’s contents. If so, that simply wouldn’t stand. Mia was back at D Room, so it was up to Bart to mete out appropriate punishment. He considered it revenge for Kaye’s teasing when he saw the air car.

Bart used the robotic housekeeping arm to gently stroke Kaye’s neck.

“Ahh!” she shrieked, jumping backward and falling flat on her butt. She shielded her neck, completely dazed, as though she’d just come under attack from an alien. Bart had never imagined she’d react that way.

It took a moment, but finally, Kaye noticed the robotic arm. “Was that you, Bart?”

“Sorry. You were just so engrossed in that signboard, I kind of...”

Kaye’s face went bright red, and she let out a little growl.

Jennifer heaved an audibly frustrated sigh. “Moving right along...”

The office of the future was completely paperless. There wasn’t a punch card or filing cabinet in sight. Each employee had their own computer, all of which were far smaller than what Bart and Kaye

worked with.

Computers weren't just front and center in the office of the future, though. The library association's library of the future featured a huge, cutting-edge computer one of ACE's competitors had developed. The machine could run a landmark program that allowed users to share passages from specific saved books around the world and to print them anywhere.

"Even this computer's creators haven't grasped the program's full latent potential," the signboard stated.

Visitors approached the computer as if discovering fire, receiving its printed passages like messages from the gods themselves. Bart couldn't help feeling a touch superior. When ANSA assigned him to supervise D Room last summer, he thought he was cursed. Now he couldn't be more grateful.

"Pretty soon, they might rename D Room something like 'the Computing Division,'" he mused.

"And maybe jokes about paying us dhampirs in pig's blood will be obsolete."

"It's thanks to your efforts that people even realize the power of computers now."

"Not mine, *ours*. That means you too, computer technician Bart Fifield."

Bart laughed. "Talk about pressure! I'm doing my best just to keep up." Still, Kaye's words felt empowering.

People used computers in various places for various tasks—including estimating the total number of Expo visitors—but the machines were far from widespread. Despite the fact that experts at ANSA said computers were indispensable to the manned lunar landing project, most people still mistrusted them, perceiving them as indecipherable mysteries.

Pilots, especially, viewed computers as enemies, simply because autopilot technology would render their hard-earned skills useless. Unfortunately, not everyone in the rough-and-rowdy test piloting community kept up with technology like Aaron did.

Autopilot technology would've been less vital if there were no issues with manual piloting, but that wasn't always the case. In fact,

Arnack's second orbital flight had been on the edge of catastrophe due to manual piloting. The pilot had engaged the manual controls without permission, trying to glimpse so-called space fireflies, then forgotten to flick an important switch during reentry. That had caused system errors and fuel issues, and radio contact dropped for almost twenty-five minutes. The pilot did make it back to Earth safely, but Division Chief Damon's rage awaited him there. "You'll spend the rest of your life grounded!" Damon had declared.

That fiasco spurred a lot of discussion at ANSA. Which functions should they automate, and which should pilots handle? Would autopilot programs reduce humans to acting as backup? If automated systems failed, who would be responsible? It was also unclear how the lunar landing project would employ computer systems.

Once again, Bart felt the heavy responsibility of his role in Arnack One and the weight D Room carried on its shoulders. It seemed as though he and Kaye existed at a time that would link the past to the future. Those thoughts swirled in his mind as the group passed through the Tour of the Future displays focused on computers.

The "tour's" last stop featured a gigantic globe with a speaker fixed to Arnack. It looped Queen Sundancia's coronation speech. The girl had only been fourteen when she gave the address, and her youth was clear in the voice telling Arnack's citizens, "*We'll build a bright future!*" When Bart remembered that that voice belonged to the same woman he would meet for dinner, his stomach churned.

As the PR group left the Tour of the Future exhibit, a reporter asked for their thoughts.

"It's like a world of dreams," Bart said. "It'll definitely thrill anyone passionate about technology and engineering."

"I truly hope computers help us build a better tomorrow," Kaye added.

Before they departed the World of the 21st Century entirely, Bart turned to look at the attraction one last time. How much of what they just saw would become reality? Just a hundred years ago, when Arnack started building its transcontinental railroad, science fiction novels told stories about military cannons blasting humans to the moon. The first powered aircraft flew in 1903, the same year an essay on space rocket theory was published in the empire later reborn as the UZSR.

Suddenly, Bart felt as though leaving the exhibit had ripped him away from the future and forced him to face reality, all its problems still ahead.

He shared his fears with Kaye in a whisper. “Arnack is aiming for a manned lunar landing in the sixties. We’re a long, long way from the twenty-first century. If the lunar landing fails, the city of the future—and all the dreams it’s promising—might be dead in the water.”

“But it’s like they say, isn’t it?” Kaye replied. “What’s impossible today is possible tomorrow.” The phrase came from a section heading in an essay on space rocket theory. It had become a motto for scientists, engineers, and technicians alike; it brought hope to everyone reaching for the unknown.

Kaye always kept her eyes fixed on the future. Her words encouraged Bart and cheered him up. “You’re right. Even spaceflight was virtually science fiction until just recently. It’s our job to lead the way to the twenty-first century!”

Gazing around the World of the 21st Century, Kaye gently put a hand to her chest. “I’ll remember this place so that one day, we’ll reach it.”

Bart, too, felt that the World of the 21st Century—a pavilion overflowing with dreams and a future that took place well beyond the moon—had made a mark on him.

Taking a break, the PR group headed for International Street, which was lined on both sides with a bevy of souvenir shops and restaurants serving food from around the world. There was lots to look at and tons of exotic clothing and unique handcrafted souvenirs for sale.

Jennifer stopped in front of a huge, red gate made of wood. “Let’s check out this nation’s pavilion. We can have lunch here.”

Bart looked up at the gate. “I think I saw one of these in a high school textbook. Do you know what it is, Kaye?”

Kaye tilted her head, curious. “No idea.”

“It’s called a torii,” Jennifer said.

“A tree?” asked Kaye.

“Do either of you know about *anything* besides science?”

“No!” Bart and Kaye chorused.

Jennifer shrugged. “At least try and learn the bare minimum. Arnack One might need you to travel internationally someday.”

Bart had lived life in a sea of science and mathematics; he’d never had much interest in foreign cultures. As the scientific world moved toward collaborative development, however, international exchanges would only become more common. Bart took Jennifer’s words to heart —he didn’t want to make another cultural blunder the way he had when he tried to pinky swear with Kaye.

Since then, Bart had attempted to learn more about the dhampirs’ pinky blood oath, but he couldn’t find any books that mentioned it. Nor could he ask anyone in D Room; they’d wonder why he was curious. He only knew what he’d learned from Kaye while UFO spotting.

He glanced over at Kaye. The huge red gate seemed to utterly amaze the girl. “A torii...” she whispered.

If Kaye memorized too much information at once, would her brain again combine it into some kind of eccentric belief? The thought made Bart chuckle. It might, but at least the results would be entertaining.

Past the torii was a spacious garden, a wonderful vision of natural beauty. On the far side was a full-scale replica of a temple flanked by miniature Buddhist altars and traditional decorations. A more modern display showcasing motorcycles, optical equipment, and industrial appliances had also been set up.

During the Great War, Arnack had bombed this nation, bringing it to the brink of destruction. Afterward, the country’s military was disarmed under Arnack’s supervision, and domestic aeronautical research was banned. However, a group of scientists who’d studied abroad in Arnack had teamed up and begun researching space development. That initiative was still in its early stages, but when the nation was prepared to launch its own satellites, ANSA would probably be glad to help them.

That kind of collaboration between formerly opposed nations had happened just recently, when Arnack launched the first satellite developed via international cooperation.

Bart knew that the world’s history was full of war and that his hopes were pipe dreams. Still, he didn’t think nations needed to compete or fight to begin with. That wasn’t to say competition was bad. In fact, a little rivalry could be a good motivator. Arnack, though,

hardly had time to focus on the UZSR. How could they, when their Manned Spacecraft Center and Rocket Development Center wouldn't even cooperate? Bart fretted about that frequently, but it wasn't a problem any ANSA employee could solve solo, so he had to face the facts.

After the PR group toured the pavilion, it was lunchtime. They entered an extraordinary wooden building. It was a restaurant but unlike any they'd ever seen. Diners were eating on platforms raised slightly above the floor.

Just as Bart and Kaye were about to step up into the dining area, restaurant staff hurriedly stopped them. Stunned, the pair froze, thinking that perhaps they'd accidentally cut in line. Then the server pointed at their feet.

"Oh." Kaye tilted her head in confusion. "We have to take our shoes off?"

They looked around to see that everyone else had removed their shoes. The *Living Illustrated* photographer made sure to snap a shot of the pair lost in cultural confusion. Jennifer flashed a mischievous, knowing grin.

"Couldn't you have warned us about the shoe thing?" Bart complained.

Jennifer shook her head. "Please. Imperfections are what make you two popular. It feels like the two people spearheading Arnack's cutting-edge technology are just a human and a dhampir prone to cute, careless slipups...or something like that."

Bart suddenly had a feeling he'd have to be extra careful when their food arrived.

At their dining booth, the group found a low table without chairs. Jennifer showed Bart and Kaye the appropriate way to sit—kneeling, resting their backsides on the soles of their feet.

"They call this 'seiza'?" asked Bart.

"That's right," said Jennifer. "It's part of this country's etiquette."

Bart and Kaye did as Jennifer told them and knelt on the cushions at the table. Their body weight pushed down on their calves, ankles, and the balls of their feet. They found it quite painful.

"This...kind of hurts. Ow," Bart muttered.

Kaye, on the other hand, sat with her back straight. “It stings, but I’m sure I’ll get used to it!”

The cultural differences surrounding Kaye intrigued her. She touched the edges of the tatami mats they sat on, listening closely to the seemingly endless arrhythmic music.

Squirming in discomfort, Bart noticed Jennifer sitting cross-legged. “Why aren’t you sitting like us?”

“Because I’m not a PR rep like you two.”

“Yeah, but didn’t you say it’s polite?”

“Quit whining. Kaye’s doing fine, isn’t she?”

Well, she *had* been doing fine. Now she was wiggling her toes uncomfortably.

“It is kind of painful,” Kaye admitted.

“I guess we just have to adjust to it.”

The pair did their best to grin and bear it as they made small talk. When their first dish arrived, though, they fell silent. They’d never seen anything like it.

“Hiyayakko...?” mumbled Bart. For a young man used to hamburgers and Southern food, this restaurant’s cuisine was otherworldly.

Kaye shook her plate gently, peering at the wobbling square of cold tofu. “Its consistency is like space food.”

“Eat with those two sticks,” Jennifer told them. “They’re called chopsticks.”

Bart and Kaye did as she said. As Bart expected, it wasn’t easy.

“Ugh, I can’t stop breaking it! It keeps dropping off the sticks!” By some miracle, he got a little hiyayakko into his mouth. “Wow, what a weird texture. Wouldn’t you say so, Kaye?”

Turning toward the girl, Bart froze. The white object on Kaye’s plate resembled whipped cream more closely than the tofu it had once been.

“Gee,” he said. “Looks like the product of a chemical reaction.”

“It’s not my fault!” Kaye cried. “I couldn’t pick it up!” Bart wasn’t sure that was the entire problem, but Jennifer felt a pang of pity and

passed Kaye a spoon. The dhampir girl ate her tofu as if it were soup. “It really is like space food.”

“I think that’s more because of what you did to it than the food itself,” Bart said.

Next, the servers set plates of sushi in front of them.

“Hm?” Bart’s eyes were glued to something on Kaye’s plate. “Why does she have that tiny scoop of green mashed potatoes?”

“That’s not mashed potato,” Jennifer said. “It’s a spice called wasabi.”

“Wasabi?” Bart had never heard of it.

“You like spicy food, right, Kaye? If you enjoy this, help yourself. I had the chefs make you extra.”

“Wow! I wonder what it tastes like?” Kaye shoved a spoonful in her mouth.

“Wait!” Jennifer said, but it was futile.

“Hm?” Kaye chewed the wasabi, letting its taste fill her mouth. Suddenly, the question mark on her face transformed into an exclamation point. She placed both hands over her mouth and collapsed onto the table, trembling.

“Huh?! Oh no, Kaye!” Bart shouted, then whirled on Jennifer. “What’s going on!?”

Jennifer put a palm to her forehead, exasperated. “It’s too late to help her now.”

“Wh-what do you mean...? What should I do!?”

Kaye slowly raised her head, moaning. Tears flowed down her cheeks. “Water! Water, wateer!” she cried.

Bart passed her a glass. “Are you okay?”

The dhampir gulped the water in a panic, but her tears didn’t stop. “That’s a different kind of spicy,” she said in a tiny voice, shaking her head. “It’s like...poison.” The experience had clearly been harrowing.

While the group waited for Kaye to recover, the waitstaff silently brought more mouthwatering dishes—sushi, tempura, and other luxurious delicacies sourced from the mountains and seas. Neither Bart

nor Kaye could focus on the food due to the pain of sitting seiza, unfortunately, but they maintained their polite pose all the same.

“Oh!” Kaye cried as a thought occurred to her. “We should buy some wasabi as a souvenir and get Mia to try it!”

“Finally, a chance for revenge,” said Bart. “What a great idea!”

They shared a mischievous grin.

When the meal ended, everyone stood to leave. Bart’s legs had fallen asleep. As he rose, it felt as though an electric shock ran through his feet. He stumbled, losing his balance completely.

“Huh?!”

Kaye was wobbly too. “Whoa!”

Bart fell right on top of Kaye with a cry of pain. His glasses went flying as the two tumbled to the floor. “Ouch!” Beneath his hand, Bart felt something soft and fleshy. “Huh...?”

“Um, Bart?” said an embarrassed Kaye, blushing.

He had his hand on her chest.

As Bart realized what he was doing, his body went hot, and he broke into a sweat. It’d been completely unintentional, but it was a horrible blunder.



“I’m so sorry!” He jerked his hand away in a panic and tried to leap to his feet. Unfortunately, his legs were still numb, and he fell forward again. “Ack!”

Kaye’s face closed in on Bart’s, her eyes and mouth wide in surprise. His lips were heading right for hers.

Evasive maneuvers! Now! his brain screamed. He craned his neck as far from Kaye as he could, landing facefirst with a *thump*. “Ow!”

His nose slammed into the tatami mats, but his head only brushed Kaye’s neck. He’d somehow managed to avoid accidentally kissing her. He heaved a sigh of relief as her shampoo’s soft, sweet scent drifted from her nape.

His breath was tickling Kaye’s ear, though, and he felt her head flinch.

“I’m so, so sorry!” Bart cried. This was no time to relax; he’d utterly disgraced himself. Since he couldn’t feel his legs even now, he rolled to one side instead of standing—only to hear the unwelcome sound of crunching metal.

“Oh no...” Bart had an awful feeling. Moving his knees, he saw that he’d bent his glasses completely out of shape. “Aww, man!”

He’d bought those blue-rimmed glasses after the protest march. Now they were little more than a warped piece of metal.

“Let’s avoid future collisions between *spacecraft*, shall we?” Jennifer suggested coldly, sipping her cup of tea.

“Lay off,” Bart sighed.

He blamed the accident on kneeling for so long. The only upside was that the PR team had a private booth, which hid the incident from other Expo attendees. Then again, Bart felt that was less an “upside” and more a tiny sliver of good luck. He glanced at Kaye, who sat up slowly and rubbed her legs, smiling bashfully at the photographer.

Although Bart scolded himself for thinking of *any* part of the experience as a silver lining, the sensation in his hand and the scent in his nose lingered in his memory. They’d remain there for quite some time.

In the end, his bent glasses were beyond mending; the group returned to International Street to purchase a replacement. Just as Bart

found some blue frames resembling the old ones, Kaye brought over a more futuristic pair.

“How about these?” she asked.

The round lenses would cover almost half his face. “They’re a bit too...quirky, aren’t they?”

“They look like they’ll fit great, though! Isn’t it boring to choose the same old blue again? At least try them on!”

“Well, all right.”

The moment the frames were on his face, Kaye burst into laughter. “You’re a mad scientist!” she squealed.

He’d walked right into her trap, but her expression looked adorably childish in a way it never did at work. Thanks to the Expo, Kaye was excitable and in high spirits, just like Bart—though, admittedly, he was quite sleep-deprived too.

Bart knew he never would’ve had this much fun attending the Expo on his own. As he watched Kaye try on a weird pair of teardrop-shaped sunglasses, he hoped she felt likewise.

The World of Commerce and Industry was jam-packed with exhibits from domestic and international companies. Most of the former were involved in some aspect of space development. One car manufacturer helping to produce a lunar rover exhibited a futuristic automobile, complete with a small nuclear propulsion system. Likewise, a telecommunications company developing communication satellites showed off the world’s first-ever cordless telephone. ACE participated too, displaying a range of computers that drew quite a few visitors.

While the future was the Expo’s overarching theme, many of the nations participating in this “world” weren’t especially technologically advanced. The staff at their booths wore traditional clothing, sharing their countries’ cultures through performances.

The innovative exhibits were intriguing, of course, but Bart felt something was missing from the pavilion. The country he was most curious about—the Zirnitra Union—wasn’t even participating. Despite

having introduced the cosmonauts themselves to the world, the UZSR shrouded their spacecraft and rockets in secrecy. Even their launch photographs were adamantly censored, with black ink hiding sections of machinery.

If the UZSR did have an exhibit here, what would they display? Bart stood thinking about that for a while, lost in curiosity.

Seeing his expression, Kaye did a double take. “Stomachache? The bathroom’s that way.”

Bart shook his head and told her what was on her mind.

Kaye nodded. “Yes, I’d like to know more about the Union too. Their whole engineering process is a mystery. More than anything, though, I’m curious about vampires.”

Dhampir history had begun with the Originals—vampires who crossed from the old continent to Arnack. On top of that, Irina wore a necklace with the blue stone in it, just like the one Kaye’s mother had.

“When I watched the cosmonauts’ press conference, I realized there’s a lot they can’t say in public,” Kaye said. “There’s still so much I’d like to ask Irina.”

Bart and Kaye would actually get to meet the cosmonauts before long. However, they were expected to do other PR tasks while the sun was still up, such as dropping by the ACE booth and mingling with people to answer questions. Many elderly visitors came to the booth suspicious of the “steel boxes” but left with a positive impression. One even laughed and said, “It’s probably a long shot, but I sure hope I’m still kicking when we roll into the twenty-first century! And I want to see us land on the moon before I’m gone—so you’d better get to it!”

Bart and Kaye promised to do their best, though they didn’t dare mention that ANSA’s biggest obstacle was internal conflict. At any rate, it was encouraging to meet so many people with great hopes for the lunar landing. Bart felt a stark contrast between the general public—who cheered ANSA on like a local baseball team—and the government, who approached the Space Race with a “win at all costs” mentality.

Once Bart and Kaye finished at the ACE booth, they got a short break. Heading back to International Street, they bought some waffles from the stall of a small country on the old continent. Bart’s waffles were heaped with fruit and whipped cream. They looked absolutely scrumptious, but he was so nervous that his appetite was practically

nonexistent.

As Bart picked at some blueberries with his fork, Kaye devoured her own waffles with gusto. “These are so good!” she cried, licking whipped cream from her lip. “I’d eat them forever if I wouldn’t put on weight!”

As Kaye beamed with joy, it struck Bart that she really wasn’t different from an ordinary human girl her age. He felt his mind drifting again.

Kaye noticed his expression. “Something wrong?”

“Oh! Uh, no. I just realized that we’re meeting the cosmonauts soon and lost my appetite.”

“If you aren’t gonna finish that, can I have it?”

“Sure.” Bart held out his waffles. “You aren’t nervous?”

Kaye’s eyes lit up as she took a spoon to the blueberries and whipped cream. “Nerves and appetite are separate, aren’t they? Eating dessert actually relaxes me.”

“Oh. Maybe I’ll try eating a little more, then.” It was true that sugar gave Bart some pep when he was tired. He shoveled some more waffle and whipped cream into his mouth, but his body didn’t want any more. “I think you and I are made of different stuff.”

Jennifer, who sat beside them, checked her schedule. “We’ll head to the World of Entertainment next. Then we’ll check out the hall where the conference is being held. Bart, are you going to stop by Showtime Street?”

“Showtime Street...?”

Huh? Why would she ask that?

According to the pamphlets, Showtime Street consisted of seedy bars and nightclubs. It was essentially a World of *Adult* Entertainment. Beautiful women clad in risqué “space-age” outfits—some so revealing you couldn’t call them “outfits” at all—apparently danced there. Now that the Expo had opened, there had already been complaints about Showtime Street; people claimed it was immoral.

“You said you were curious about it, didn’t you?” Jennifer asked him, putting a finger to her lip.

“What?! I said no such thing!”

“Are you sure? Apparently it’s being shut down in a couple of days, so it’s now or never.”

“Not interested!”

Jennifer continued playing dumb. “You aren’t?”

At this rate, Kaye will definitely get the wrong idea! Bart turned toward his partner to explain himself.

Kaye cocked her head. “Isn’t Showtime Street a red-light district?” she asked, her finger on her chin.

This is so bad. Bart glared daggers at Jennifer.

“I never said I planned to go or that I was interested. I don’t know who you have me mixed up with, but please stop.”

Jennifer took a graceful sip of her coffee. “It was a joke.”

“Huh?”

“You needed to relax a little,” she said with a shrug. “So, I cracked a joke.”

“Uh, you shouldn’t make weird stuff up to help me relax! That ‘joke’ was the opposite of relaxing!”

“You know, that country with wasabi also has a spiritual practice called zazen that gives people an avenue to eliminate their worldly desires and sins. Since you’re so anxious, it might be good for you. You may want to try it.” Jennifer was being anything but helpful.

“I will not!”

“Worldly desires and sins?” Kaye repeated, seeming even more confused.

“Ugh. Please, knock it off already.” If Jennifer and Kaye ganged up on him, he didn’t stand a chance.

But just then, Jennifer turned her mischievous grin on Kaye, who was spooning another bite of her waffle into her mouth. “Oh, I bet you’re just full of desires and sins of your own. Aren’t you, Kaye?”

“Hngh!” Kaye choked on her waffle and started beating her chest.

Watching her squirm, Jennifer nodded approvingly. “You pretend you’re always lost in calculations, but your imagination runs wild, doesn’t it?”

“It does not! Not a bit, not at all! Ever!” Kaye replied, stubborn.

Jennifer broke into laughter. “I suppose I shouldn’t expect any less from such a pure saint.”

“Jennifer!” Bart snapped.

Deep down, he was relieved that she’d stopped scrutinizing him. He actually *was* interested in Showtime Street and secretly wanted to see it himself. He’d never told Jennifer, though—he was certain of that. That was the real reason he’d panicked when she brought it up.

The World of Entertainment occupied an opera house big enough to hold a thousand people. Famous musical acts and comedians performed there often. From May 11 through May 13, however, it would host the Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.

Arnack’s prime minister had been scheduled to deliver the conference’s opening remarks. Unfortunately, he was unable to attend due to a cold. Instead, he sent comments: “The space age is finally upon us. I see a peaceful future—one that’s bright, healthy, and full of hope for the sake of our children and future generations. To make that future a reality, Arnack’s scientific institutions seek the world’s brightest minds, regardless of ethnicity or religion.”

Bart didn’t know how bad the prime minister’s cold was, but he assumed the man had to ensure he was healthy enough to attend Parliament. It would’ve been pointless for him to overexert himself at the Expo anyway, since the attendees were most excited about the cosmonauts and the queen.

Thanks in large part to the conference’s famous speakers, the opera house was packed. Seven sessions, each featuring ANSA scientists and industry bigwigs, would take place over the conference’s three days.

Day one’s sessions had been “Astronautics and the Planets” and “Deep Space Exploration.” The speakers, including renowned scientists and an aircraft company vice-president, had discussed satellite production.

The topics for today—day two—were “Astronautical Science’s Impact on Earth” and “Astronautical Manufacturing.” Both sessions

would focus on everyday life, and several scientists from companies exhibiting at the Expo would speak.

Given their own schedule, Bart and Kaye couldn't stay long at the World of Entertainment. They at least had a chance to observe a session from backstage, which gave them a sense of the conference's atmosphere. An engineer from an electronic appliances company was giving a passionate speech on the future of space exploration in hopes of acquiring funding from the politicians in attendance.

"Space development will improve society in the following ways..." He went on to say that weather satellites would predict flooding, saving thousands of lives; medical research in zero gravity would facilitate the development of new medicine; electronics for spacecraft would lead to new compact industrial products; fuel cells for space travel would improve vehicles for general use; and solar power would prove a source of infinite energy.

Listening to the man speak, Bart imagined himself onstage. His cheek twitched nervously. "How will I even *talk* up there?" he muttered.

"It'll be so nerve-racking," Kaye agreed, tensing.

Day three's sessions would be "Manned Spaceflight and the Lunar Landing" and "Collaborative Astronautics"; a question period would wrap things up. Since no decision had yet been reached regarding a lunar landing method, Bart expected heated debate to erupt at the first session. He just hoped that seeing scientific infighting in person wouldn't dishearten regular citizens too much.

Bart wasn't *only* worried, however—he was also excited to discuss collaborative space development with Lev and Irina. Arnack and Zirnitra still hadn't made concrete progress toward cooperation, and Bart's great hope was that the conference would be a step forward for both nations.

The conference organizers didn't expect the question period to be too troublesome. It boiled down to a panel discussion allowing speakers to discuss space casually in Queen Sundancia's presence. Nevertheless, Bart was petrified. You definitely couldn't predict what the audience would ask, since some of the questions would come from kids, and he was horrible at thinking on his feet.

Once the PR team had explored the conference hall, it was finally time to meet Lev and Irina. Bart and Kaye had both made a point of

reading up on Zirnitran culture to ensure they didn't do anything rude. Bart felt like he'd done as much preparing as he could, but worry still crept along his spine.

As usual, Jennifer felt no such nervousness. "Let's get moving. We can practice a little before they arrive."

"Yes! Finally, we get to meet them!" Kaye's eyes were wide with excitement. She turned to Bart, but he was frozen stiff. "You look so concerned, Bart. What's on your mind?"

"I think I need the bathroom," he said. It'd been a while, but his old stomachache was back.

"Not again," Kaye and Jennifer muttered, stifling their smiles.

The sun sank behind the wide, picturesque sea, and the sunlight faded with it. Now was the time when vampires could come out of hiding.

A special stage had been erected to one side of the Expo entrance, just next to the World of Science. There, the flags of both the UK and UZSR flew full-staff. Hundreds had gathered for a chance to glimpse the two Zirnitran heroes. Bart and Kaye waited alongside them for the arrival of the cosmonauts' party.

Bart had rehearsed with Expo committee staff, but his heart still beat a mile a minute. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then heard the crowd roar. The two figures he spotted were exactly like those he'd seen on television: Lev and Irina. The pair waved at the onlookers as they walked along with a security detail in finely tailored suits. They looked every bit the dignified cosmonauts. Irina walked under the shade of a parasol. She hadn't worn her necklace with the blue stone.

The crowd clapped, and Kaye welcomed the cosmonauts with a bright smile. Irina stood in front of Kaye, and Lev in front of Bart. That was exactly as they'd rehearsed, yet Bart's brain was short-circuiting. He'd imagined this very scene an entire year ago, and now it was actually happening before his eyes. Everything he'd run through mentally—all the rehearsals—vanished from his mind.

All he mustered was, "Uh..."

At the sight of the flustered Bart, Lev extended a hand. “I’m Lev Leps. Nice to meet you.”

“L-Likewise,” said Bart, gripping Lev’s hand in his own. “I’m Bart Fifield.”

“Meeting you is an honor, Bart.”

“N-no, no. Th-the honor’s all mine.” Bart felt like a robot, but Lev smiled kindly at him.

Astronauts and cosmonauts tended to be relatively short due to weight requirements, so Bart was a little taller than Lev. Still, the cosmonaut had a strong presence.

Next to Bart and Lev, Irina and Kaye also shook hands. Kaye’s face rarely revealed her worries, but now she looked surprisingly stiff. Her lips were drawn tight, as though she was reining in her true feelings.

On the other hand, Irina looked directly at Kaye, scrutinizing her. After a while, she seemed satisfied, letting out a thoughtful hum.

Then Irina and Lev swapped places, and the vampire girl stood in front of Bart. The moment their eyes met, his breath caught in his throat. In person, Irina seemed so different from anything he’d seen on television. She had the palest skin and darkest hair, as well as a dignified air unlike a human’s or dhampir’s. It made her seem distant. Her reserved poise reminded Bart of a moon hanging in an empty sky.

The setting sun’s light stained Irina’s eyes deep crimson. She was beautiful in an entirely different way from Kaye; her charm seemed almost hazardous.

“I am Irina Luminesk,” she said. Her voice was clear and youthful.

Feeling a little more at ease, Bart introduced himself and offered a hand. Irina smiled and shook it. Her fingers were cold to the touch. Bart wondered whether vampires naturally had a low body temperature.

Once the introductions were complete, Lev and Irina turned to the onlookers gathered around the stage. Smiling at the crowd, Lev took the microphone offered to him. “Hello. We have traveled the nation of Arnack from east to west. Every city is unique, with beautiful nature and delicious food. I find your country to be a most wonderful place.” He passed Irina the microphone.

“We were honored to visit your schools and appear on your television programs,” she continued, her voice smooth and polite.

“Everyone was kind and friendly, even to a vampire like myself. I am grateful.”

For a few minutes, the cosmonauts shared their experiences traveling the continent. They were excellent speakers. That was a given, considering they’d toured the globe by now.

Lev brought their remarks to a close. “It is truly a shame that our nation lacks a pavilion at this exposition for space and peace. However, we look forward to seeing and experiencing the world’s technological and scientific successes. We hope to bring something valuable home with us.” The crowd applauded, and the welcome ceremony ended.

The World of Science would be the first stop on the cosmonauts’ Expo tour. The tour group totaled about twenty people, including staff and security from both countries.

As they walked, Lev and Irina signed autographs for attendees and handed out preprepared photographs. Even when their security guards had to refuse autographs to keep people from getting too close, the cosmonauts still smiled. They made time for excited children; if a boy or girl said they wanted to grow up to be an astronaut, Lev and Irina grinned and replied, “Space is out there waiting for you too.”

Lev and Irina’s popularity was eye-opening for Bart. The UK’s astronauts, Aaron and Steve, were incredibly famous in their own right, and people often asked Bart himself for his autograph. Still, the fervor for the cosmonauts was much more intense. The crown of “history’s first” put them on a whole different level. Bart still disliked the thought of competing when it came to space, but now he knew how important it was for the UK to win the race to the moon.

At the same time, he also wanted Lev’s and Irina’s autographs. He’d even brought his copy of their book, *The Journey to Space*, for that very purpose. He wasn’t about to beg for their signatures on the job, but he hoped he might get a chance later—maybe after dinner.

Bart hadn’t told Kaye his plan, but he figured he should let her know so he wouldn’t catch her off guard. He whispered it to her, ensuring Jennifer was out of earshot.

Kaye’s eyes widened in surprise. “Huh?”

“Oh. I, uh...I guess I shouldn’t stoop to that?” Bart scratched his head, embarrassed.

Kaye waved her hands to emphasize that that wasn't it. "I actually brought *my* copy too," she admitted.

"You did?!"

"W-well, I-I mean...who knows if we'll ever see them again?"

"Talk about abusing your position," Bart teased.

"Look who's talking!"

As they laughed, Jennifer swooped in like an eagle spotting prey. "What're you two scheming with all your whispering?"

"N-nothing!" said Bart.

"We were just discussing the conference," Kaye lied.

"Hmm. And here I assumed you were working out a way to snag yourselves autographs from the cosmonauts."

"D-don't be silly," Bart said. Sometimes Jennifer's instincts were so sharp, it was utterly terrifying.

Jennifer gazed at them. "Look, nobody minds you getting their autographs to commemorate the Expo. Just do it outside work hours. Before bedtime, for instance," she said, hammering the point home.

Her gaze rested on the female Delivery Crew agent in the cosmonauts' retinue, who watched the crowd the way someone might survey a battlefield. "On the other hand, having *my* permission may not matter," Jennifer added. "Getting through her might be a bigger problem."

"She belongs to the secret police, right?" Kaye asked in a whisper.

Jennifer nodded. "Anything goes with them. I'm talking purges, abduction... Terrifying stuff. I don't think they'll try anything, but it'd do you well to be careful."

"Please don't creep us out like that," Bart said.

Jennifer grinned. "Keep an eye open for wiretaps."

"G-got it."

True, she was joking. At the same time, wiretaps seemed totally plausible. The UK's citizens considered the UZSR a dark and oppressive place where neighbors disappeared in the blink of an eye. That was a far cry from Lev and Irina's habitual warmth and smiles. In truth, the political goal of their world travels may have been to scrub the UZSR's

public image clean.

The World of Science showcased Arnack's extensive scientific knowledge. It was designed to intrigue and bewitch the public, and over a hundred individual scientists were in attendance. There were several themed pavilions, but the host group guided Lev and Irina to the government-funded science museum first so the cosmonauts could learn about Arnack's scientific endeavors.

The museum tour began with a short film on scientific history, followed by an exhibit on physics and mathematical formulas. The museum depicted science as applied to various disciplines, ranging from its impact on everyday life to curious art projects that engaged the five senses. And although scientific development had also produced the nuclear missiles Arnack was testing at that very moment, nothing related to those weapons was on display. Instead, the entire pavilion was dedicated purely to hopes and dreams.

Lev called the museum wonderful. Irina was entranced by the illusory art on display, revisiting it several times. Kaye chatted with her throughout the tour, and the two quickly broke the ice. More than anything, Bart wished he could steal some of Kaye's confidence. He desperately wanted to talk to Lev, but he was at a loss as far as what to say and how to say it. He would approach the cosmonaut, only to find himself backing away again.

Come on, let's do this! Mentally, Bart uttered his magic words—the very words Lev had spoken during his launch. He wanted to tell Lev how the phrase had reassured him, yet doing so here seemed strange.

Perhaps sensing Bart growing more and more perplexed, Lev spoke first. "I think I'd want to spend all day here if we had more time."

"Y-yes! And look at...everything...more carefully! All of it!"

If conversation was a game of catch, Bart was constantly dropping the ball in panic. It was true that he, like Lev, would've loved to tour the Expo at a more leisurely pace. They didn't have the luxury of time, however, since they were here on duty.

If I visited on my own time, I'd just want to bask in this deep ocean of

science. That was how enticing this “world” of the Expo felt.

After leaving the science museum, the tour group headed for ANSA’s pavilion. It was a large space with a plethora of displays—looking at all of them took about half an hour. Thanks to all the publicity around the Expo, it was packed. At the entrance, short films played on space exploration, rocket development, and ANSA’s founding. Crowds formed in front of dioramas of satellites and rocket engines. Staff members well versed on the more complicated exhibits—such as cutting-edge fuel systems and satellite guidance methods—were also on hand to explain the displays simply and answer everyday citizens’ questions. Everything was accounted for; clearly, the pavilion aimed to make a huge impact.

Among the varied exhibits, one in particular drew lots of attention: a small, conical, plainly colored cabin. It was actually *the* cabin from the Hermes spacecraft Arnack’s first astronaut, Aaron Fifield, had piloted. ANSA usually kept the cabin in storage but had taken it out for this special occasion. Even Bart, Aaron’s own brother, was seeing it up close for the first time.

Bart felt the emotions space conjured in him igniting a fire in his heart. The cabin was so tiny, yet its contents represented all of Arnack’s greatest scientific achievements. People said cabins “wore” spacecraft the way humans wore spacesuits. This cabin didn’t seem nearly safe or strong enough to ride through the skies into unknown space, yet Aaron had done just that.

Lev and Irina took a photo with the cabin, at which point a journalist near them asked, “What do you think of this Arnackian cabin, Miss Luminesk?”

“It’s a little smaller than the one I traveled in,” she replied, smiling. Lev nodded.

Nobody actually knew how big Irina’s spacecraft had been; the UZSR still hadn’t publicized that. For all the reporters knew, it might actually have been smaller than Arnack’s. Trying to squeeze details out of Lev and Irina, the journalists asked all kinds of questions, but to no avail. The cosmonauts answered as if reading from a textbook.

Jennifer patted Bart’s shoulder. “You and Kaye go stand in front of the cabin. Get a picture with Lev and Irina.”

They did as she instructed.

"Do you think it's all right to pose in a photo like this?" Kaye asked Bart. "We aren't astronauts."

"Well, you did play a major role in the orbital flight calculations," he replied. "I'd say you earned it."

Kaye's face lit up. "Wow! Thanks, Bart."

While Kaye had a record of stellar achievements, however, Bart was literally just an astronaut's brother. The old Bart from a year ago would've slouched and fussed and panicked about this photo. Now he knew his role in Arnack One required very specific things of him, and he intended to do his best. The engineer and cosmonaut pairs flanked the cabin to have their pictures taken, quickly overwhelmed with camera flashes.

Lev turned to Bart. "When I met your brother, he said you still hold the record in a compact satellite launch competition."

Bart, equal parts flattered and embarrassed, couldn't help wondering if Aaron had said more. "Did you, uh...hear much else about me from him?" he asked timidly.

"Aaron said he's very proud of you," Lev replied. "He said that, although you don't look related, you are in fact brothers."

Bart shrugged the comment off, chuckling. It was probably true that he and Aaron were quite different in terms of both physicality and personality.

"But I think there is something similar about you two," Lev added, surprising Bart. "Don't you, Irina?"

"Hmm," Irina muttered, peering at Bart, who felt flustered under her ruby-red eyes. "He's wearing glasses. I can't tell."

"Oh! Sorry. I literally just bought these," Bart said. "They probably look awful."

"How about taking them off, then?" Kaye slid the frames from his face.

Immediately, Irina declared, "They don't look alike at all."

"No, no," said Lev. "I don't mean their faces. I mean their demeanor."

"Mmm. I don't know," the vampire girl said stubbornly. She turned to Kaye. "Do you think they seem similar?"

Kaye handed Bart his glasses, crossing her arms. “Well...” she began. “Hmm.” She was lost in thought for a while. Finally, she said, “No, I don’t.”

Awkwardness hung over the room. Even the nearby journalists and photographers were arguing about whether Bart resembled his brother. It made him uncomfortable, and he fiddled with his glasses. *What am I even supposed to say at a time like this?*

“Wait a second!” Kaye turned toward the crowd gathered around them. “When I said Bart and Aaron weren’t similar, I didn’t mean it as an insult. Bart is Bart! There’s only one of him—the same way, in the entirety of space, there are no two identical stars. Bart’s a star of his own!”

“A star?” murmured Irina, peering at Bart again.

“Yes,” said Kaye. “Every star releases its own light.”

The onlookers nodded, muttering about stars as they turned their camera flashes on Bart and shot more photos. Unfortunately, *that* particular light made Bart want to disappear. Kaye simply watched as it happened; she couldn’t tell how he felt. When the photo op finally ended and Bart was free, Lev—who, after all, had begun the whole exchange—was apologetic.

“I, uh...I guess you two are not alike, in the end,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

The visitors, journalists, and photographers laughed, and everything calmed down. Finally free of the scrutiny, Bart broke out in sweat all over.

Putting aside whether he *was* similar to Aaron, Bart was just happy that Kaye had compared him to a star. When he joined ANSA the previous year, he hadn’t thought of himself as anything more than a fleck of stardust in the vast darkness of space.

He still couldn’t say whether he’d truly become a shining star, but if Kaye saw him that way after all their time together, Bart wanted to believe her.

Next, the group headed to the “Moon Jump,” an attraction designed to let regular people experience astronaut training. The special apparatus simulated lunar gravity, which was one-sixth of Earth’s. It enabled riders to feel as light as they would on the moon.

Harnesses hanging from the Moon Jump’s ceiling connected to a saddle for riders to sit in, and a reinforced rubber seat belt locked them in place. There were two harnesses, so two people could try it at once. By the time Bart and the tour group reached the Moon Jump, children were having a blast jumping meters into the air.

A chill went down Bart’s spine. *It looks like fun...but can I do that?*

“Bart, Kaye, you’re up,” said Jennifer, who’d gotten permission for Arnack One to ride the Moon Jump. “You’re the hosts here. Show Lev and Irina how it’s done!”

“Show them how it’s done...?” Kaye repeated anxiously. “But I’ve never tried this before!”

“It’s just jumping, right? You’ll be fine. Even kids are doing it.” Then Jennifer swiped Bart’s glasses off his face.

“Whoa!” he cried.

“I’ll hold on to them,” she told him. “You wouldn’t want to lose another pair.”

Kaye let out a yelp. “What about my skirt?” she asked, gripping the hem.

With a tilt of her head, Jennifer asked, “What about it?”

“Well, I mean... If I jump, then when I land...” Her skirt would fly into the air.

Jennifer understood but didn’t let Kaye off the hook. “No problem. Just make sure the seat belt’s tight over your hips when you put on the harness. Nobody will see a thing.”

It did seem the seat belt would block the wind and prying eyes, although Kaye was still doubtful. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. Anyway, what does it hurt if people get a little look-see?” Jennifer grabbed Kaye’s skirt and pulled it upward.

“D-don’t!” Kaye cried, tugging her skirt down.

As requested, Jennifer let go. “Hmph. This is why you’re still a pure saint.”

“Lay off already!” Kaye’s face flushed bright red.

Ignoring Kaye’s embarrassment, Jennifer pushed her toward the Moon Jump. “Go on. People are waiting.”

“F-fine.” Kaye gave up and trudged toward the harness.

Then Jennifer pushed Bart—who’d watched the whole exchange in shock—toward the other harness. Irina, meanwhile, shoved Lev toward Bart’s side of the Moon Jump.

“No need to push me!” Lev said. “I wasn’t going to look.”

“But you might still see something,” Irina snapped. She clearly wanted Lev away from Kaye. Lev shook his head, grinning wryly as he met Bart’s eyes. Being a global hero wasn’t always easy.

The equipment attendants helped Bart and Kaye prepare for their first-ever Moon Jump experience, strapping belts around their upper thighs to secure their hips to the harness. Once Bart was buckled in, the Moon Jump pulled his body into the air. He gasped in surprise.

Kaye made a point of adjusting her skirt inside the belts to prevent anyone getting a “look-see,” as Jennifer called it. She was so careful, her skirt seemed as securely guarded as the Iron Curtain itself. Even if it billowed, the most people would see was the skin above her knees.

She shot Bart a pointed glare as he watched her. “No peeking.”

“I think you’ll be fine, like Jennifer said,” Bart replied.

“I sure hope so.” Kaye looked a little relieved but tugged her skirt down all the same, making doubly sure. When she was ready, the attendants told the pair they had one minute on the equipment and signaled for them to go ahead.

Curious about what to expect, Bart tentatively took a short jump. He floated easily into the air, feeling none of the gravitational pull he was used to.

“I’m so light!” he cried. *Is this how I’d feel on the moon?* He jumped again and again, then exclaimed, “Time to go for broke!”

Kicking off the ground with everything he had, Bart jumped so high he felt as if he might really reach the moon. He let out a shout, his stomach seeming to shrink. In elementary school, he’d knocked over every single hurdle he was forced to jump. He couldn’t believe what he felt now—it was like being a superhero.

“This is amazing, Kaye!” he exclaimed, turning to look at her. “Huh?”

He almost lost his balance. Kaye was jumping tiny distances as if skipping rope, apparently still worried about her skirt. Bart sympathized, but he desperately wanted her to experience the Moon Jump with him.

“Kaye! Jump as high as you can!” he cried from overhead. “Just once! Please!”

Kaye eyed him with both envy and hesitation. “B-but...”

“We engineers can’t go to the moon! So, the Expo brought the moon to us!”

Bart was so thrilled, he wasn’t even sure he was making sense. His excitement, more than his words, seemed to get through to Kaye. The dhampir gripped her hem in her hands and let out a small battle cry, then leaped into the air, rising even higher than Bart.

“Whoa!” she blurted, eyes widening and skirt flapping in the air.

When she hit the ground, she shouted “I’m jumping again!” and leapt once more into the air. Each time she did, her grin grew. “Wow! I never thought I’d ever jump this high! Lunar gravity is magical!”

Kaye seemed captivated by the experience. Meanwhile, Bart tried to outdo her with each jump. They both felt like astronauts on the moon. After a time, they realized all the jumping was supremely exhausting. It occurred to Bart that, although jumping high didn’t take much energy, it wasn’t something he or Kaye did often—they spent their days at their desks. On top of that, his belts were biting into his legs.

By the end of their minute, Bart and Kaye were hanging in their harnesses like broken dolls. Bart’s knees wobbled as the attendants took them out. His thighs ached too. Kaye sat and rubbed her sore legs as journalists crowded around to get Bart’s impressions.

“It’s not easy being an astronaut,” he told them.

Next, it was Lev and Irina’s turn to try the Moon Jump. The onlookers applauded as they watched the two cosmonauts approach the harnesses. The pair were clearly used to similar exercises—it was easy for the attendants to strap them in. The cosmonauts’ jumps were smooth and stable too. They even waved at the crowd with casual smiles as

they leaped into the air. They never got winded, and when they finished up, only a light sweat beaded their foreheads. Bart was in awe; he was sweating like a pig.

“Astronauts are in peak physical condition, aren’t they?” Kaye mused, smoothing her hair as she watched the cosmonauts enviously. “Having experienced lunar gravity myself, though, I think the engineer route really was best for me.”

Once Lev and Irina had finished their minute on the Moon Jump, the attendants unclipped them from their harnesses. That was when Bart noticed a change in the two cosmonauts, although it was only subtle.

“Hm?”

A flash of sorrow crossed Irina’s face as she looked behind her at the Moon Jump. Lev patted her back gently to lift her spirits, but there was a similar loneliness in his expression. The moment between them was quick, and soon enough, they returned to smiling for the crowds and reporters.

Bart wondered if Lev and Irina were wiped out. Sure, they might be in fine physical health, but the 21st Century Expo was their last stop on a long trip across the continent. Compared to that, one minute of jumping in lunar gravity was nothing.

He had now had an opportunity to meet his heroes, and as one of Arnack’s PR reps, it was Bart’s job to ensure they were well taken care of. He wiped sweat from his face and stood, smiling at the Zirnitrans. “The next pavilion has the most popular attraction in the entire Expo: the Space Flier,” he told them. “An aircraft company entrusted with making ANSA’s rockets designed it. Think of it as a futuristic video tour!”

Lev and Irina smiled and nodded.

“I’ve been looking forward to the Space Flier ever since I saw it in the Expo brochure,” Bart added. “We should definitely check it out.” He finally felt as though he was fulfilling his duties with the cosmonauts, and it warmed his heart.

The tour group put the ANSA pavilion behind them, heading for the Space Flier. It was a domed theater that seated seven hundred and fifty people. Images played on the dome’s interior surface courtesy of the world’s largest projector, creating an “outer space” environment for

viewers—a space-age planetarium. People said that space tourism would emerge as technology developed, but the Space Flier was a chance to tour the stars a little earlier.

Bart and the tour party entered the theater alongside a lucky group who happened to be visiting at the same time. They sat in one of the dome's steeply pitched rows, awaiting the start of their journey. Irina and Kaye were seated on either side of Bart. Everyone was restless and excited. They were about to embark on a journey into the unknown. Kaye fidgeted in her seat, putting her hands to her chest and taking a deep breath.

Trying to rein in his anticipation, Bart turned to Kaye. "This is like a dream, isn't it? First jumping on the moon, now a trip through outer space."

"It makes you wish the twenty-first century would get here even quicker," Kaye replied. "Although I'll be an old lady by the time it does!"

"I sure hope they won't set age limits on space travel. Or add strength and endurance requirements," Bart agreed.

As his thoughts drifted toward the twenty-first century, a loud buzzer rang out. The dome lights faded, wrapping them all in darkness.

"Hello, everyone! It's five o'clock on May 12 in the year 2001!" The narrator sounded just like a flight attendant. "This flight will soon leave Earth on a trip to the Milky Way. We'll travel to the sun, stopping at the moon. Then we'll pass through Saturn's rings, flying through the galaxy to the far reaches of space! This will be a two-billion-lightyear flight."

A grand synthesized symphony played to ready them for launch.

"Please prepare for liftoff. We hope you enjoy your trip," a robotic voice said, then began a countdown. "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero. Liftoff."

Rockets roared for a few seconds, and the darkness above glittered with stars as the spaceship of seven hundred and fifty passengers began journeying through an imaginary "outer space" created with stop-motion animation.

"Our course is now set for the sun," said the narrator. "We're heading for the center of the solar system!" A little red dot representing

the sun's flaming heat appeared ahead, growing little by little. "The sun is a blessing to those of us on Earth. It's a gigantic fusion reactor that converts about four million tons of matter into energy every single second!"

"Whoa!" gasped a young woman, her excitement clear. Bart assumed it was Kaye, but he was wrong; it was Irina. "That's amazing, isn't it, Lev?!" she demanded, tugging Bart's sleeve. She was so engrossed in the film, she'd forgotten which side Lev was sitting on.

She kept yanking Bart's sleeve until he whispered, "Um, I'm Bart."

"Huh?!" Irina paused, then hurriedly released his shirt. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"You'll disturb other viewers if you keep speaking so loudly," Lev scolded Irina in a whisper.

"I-I know! I just thought... Well, human technology is more impressive than I was aware of!" Despite putting on a haughty front, she soon trailed off into muttering.

"Irina's surprisingly cute, isn't she?" Kaye said to Bart with a giggle.

"Yeah. I pictured her as much more arrogant," Bart admitted. For one thing, Irina was a pureblood vampire, and it was hard not to see that race as mysterious and unknown. Now, though, Bart felt that the four of them were growing closer. It was as if the dream of space linked them, making them comrades-in-arms pursuing the same goals.

As Kaye and Bart whispered back and forth, their spaceship continued its journey at the speed of light. It lapped the sun, then headed from Mercury to Venus. Bart was familiar with this trip; it was the very one in *Fly Me to the Moon*. He remembered imagining these sights as a sickly, bedridden boy lost in his favorite book. Now that daydream resumed and played out before his eyes—so close he could almost reach out and touch it.

"We're changing course for the moon!" announced the narrator. Their ship closed in on the moon, which seemed to float just next to Earth. The animated yellow-gray lunar surface looked rocky and uneven. "Until the twentieth century, people only looked up at the moon. These days, it's just the first stop on our journey to the stars!"

In this vision of the twenty-first century, someone had already landed on the moon. How had they gotten there, though? Bart found himself picturing the first lunar landing, but he didn't think of an Earth orbit rendezvous or direct ascent. Instead, he envisioned a lunar orbit rendezvous. After all, wasn't that the best solution in the end?

Bart's mind put the pieces together as he sat inside the Space Flier, visualizing Project Hyperion. A lunar lander would detach from a spacecraft and descend to the moon. As astronauts exited the lander to explore the surface, the command center would keep orbiting the moon. Once the astronauts finished, they'd get into the lander and prepare to go back. To return, the lander would rendezvous with, then dock at, the command center.

Remembering the Moon Jump, Bart realized the lander would require minimal energy to launch from the moon, thanks to the low lunar gravity.

A lunar orbit rendezvous made the most sense and met all ANSA's needs. Yet the researcher who originally suggested the method had been laughed at by his superiors, his proposal denied. The details of his paper revealed why: As an engineering thesis, it was riddled with errors. It gave the lunar lander's weight as four and a half tons, when it would really be at least three times that. The researcher's failure to account for the weight of the air in the lander had caused the stark discrepancy. It was only natural that his idea had been shot down when he hadn't even factored in such crucial details.

Even once those numbers *were* accounted for, there were glaring problems with the lunar orbit rendezvous method. A rendezvous 380,000 kilometers from Earth was risky, and success would require dependable computers. Those fears weren't easy to allay. Still, no data supported the government science advisor's claim that a lunar orbit rendezvous would reduce the chance of the astronauts' safe return to just 1 percent.

As Bart ran through all this in his head, the far side of the "moon" shrank until it vanished completely. While the Space Flier traveled among the planets, passing Mars and Jupiter, he focused solely on the lunar landing.

It was true that the UK's current technology would create difficulties for astronauts working 380,000 kilometers from Earth. To be blunt, they'd be impossibilities rather than difficulties. Even so, Bart

remembered Kaye's words about the hopes rocket scientists some fifty years ago had entrusted to the present: "*What's impossible today is possible tomorrow.*"

The manned lunar orbital flight had also needed to overcome the impossible to succeed. So, wouldn't it be best for ANSA to trust the powerful computers of the future and reconsider a lunar orbit rendezvous?

Would there be anywhere better to make that point than at the conference tomorrow? But...

Bart's confidence dipped as he pictured the famous speakers attending the conference, including Oliver Kissing, the Manned Spacecraft Center's director; and Vil Klaus, the very rocket scientist who'd given him dreams of space as a child.

When it came to the lunar landing, Klaus—a proponent of Earth orbit rendezvous—currently had the most say. Furthermore, ANSA's Vice-Administrator had commented on the topic at April's council meeting about the national budget: "Regarding Project Hyperion, Earth orbit rendezvous is our best bet at present. Our backup plan is direct ascent."

Kissing objected to EOR, calling it a "risky bet." Still, the space program might finally be approaching a unified direction, even if that was happening through a process of elimination.

At tomorrow's conference sessions, the participants would likely attempt to hash out a comfortable middle ground. Bart worried that throwing a third proposal into the mix at this point—as the dust finally appeared to be settling—would just confuse things more.

The other speakers might even ignore his suggestion entirely. On top of that, if Bart dared go off script, he could be looking at a demotion. Expert staff members from ACE worked in D Room now, and ANSA had no use for rookies rocking the boat with wild ideas.

Bart realized what was most important: getting Kaye's opinion before anything else. She was his partner in all this, so his wild idea could cause her just as much trouble as him.

He glanced over at Kaye. She sat silently in her seat, staring at the sea of stars on the domed ceiling. She wore that same expression whenever she worked on a task in D Room. Bart didn't want to disturb her during the show, so he decided not to say anything, turning his

attention back to their trip through space.

As their spaceship flew through Saturn's rings toward the end of the solar system, Earth was little more than a speck in the vastness.

"We're leaving the Milky Way for the Orion Nebula," the narrator said.

No one dared to speak. Everyone was but matter passing through space. They saw unbelievable celestial bodies: double stars, red giants, and white dwarves.

"This is the enormity of the galaxy we exist in. We currently know of a hundred billion stars—and there are even more in galaxies beyond our own."

The spaceship passed through a supernova. Light was born during a star's death. Perfect darkness and silence fell, and then a heartbeat slowly thumped over the speakers.

"We've arrived at our destination two billion lightyears away. Now we'll return to our very own planet Earth." As the narrator spoke, the lights in the theater came up.

The viewers let out a collective sigh.

"We look forward to traveling with you again!"

Even after their trip ended, Bart felt like he was floating, as if his mind were still among the stars. Kaye sat next to him, her hand on her chin and her head in the clouds. After a second, Bart realized she wasn't dazed; she was just lost in calculations.

"Uh, Kaye?" She didn't respond. He tapped her shoulder.

Kaye flinched, finally returning from space. "Oh! It's over?"

"Did you leave your heart two billion lightyears away?" he joked.

"Something like that."

As they talked, the next crowd shuffled in. Bart realized now wasn't the time to sit chatting about a lunar orbit rendezvous. He'd have to ask Kaye about that later in the evening, during their last review of their conference presentation. At the moment, he needed to focus on being a good host to the Zirnitran cosmonauts.

Bart looked over at Lev and Irina, and his curiosity was once again piqued. "Hm?"

The two cosmonauts were sharing a somewhat lonely, sorrowful smile, just as they had after the Moon Jump. Bart was concerned, but he couldn't ask about their feelings while reporters and the Delivery Crew agent crowded around them. He decided that, if a chance presented itself at some point, he'd ask if they were okay. If some concern had cropped up as they traveled across the country, hopefully he could help them out.

Next to the World of Science was the awe-inspiring Space Tower, the gleaming symbol of the Expo. Twenty thousand people visited its UFO-shaped observation deck daily. It was a popular spot for photographs.

The tour group hopped into the tower's high-speed elevator. Racing up a hundred and sixty meters to the observation deck felt like being abducted by aliens. The slowly rotating observation deck, which boasted its own restaurant, was glassed in and full of tourists—who dropped what they were doing the moment they spotted the cosmonauts and their entourage. The security detail was left to fend off the crowd while Bart, Kaye, and the cosmonauts looked out the windows.

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Irina, soaking up the view.

The sea glittered gold, and the islands in the bay looked like black pearls. Nearby, the city sparkled with light, and snow-capped mountains sat to the north. The sky overhead faded beautifully from orange to purple. It was so pretty, it could've been a postcard. Irina was glued to the window as she gazed at the wondrous scenery.

Kaye smiled. "I'm thrilled that she likes the view."

"How different does this look, compared to seeing Earth from space?" asked Bart.

"It's completely different," Lev answered, grinning. "Seeing the view from a spaceship porthole is one thing, but it's another thing to see Earth on your own two feet."

"Wow." Bart couldn't even imagine how the scenery must've looked from space.

"Irina has never seen a beautiful seascape like this," Lev continued, watching the vampire girl peer out the window. "She grew up in the mountains, where oceans were a distant thing. She used to have acrophobia."

"She was afraid of heights, you mean?" asked Bart.

"Didn't your speech last year mention that?" Kaye added.

Bart remembered the speech Lev gave at the Neglin in Sangrad, the UZSR's capital, to celebrate his historic spaceflight.

Recalling his speech, Lev chuckled nostalgically. "The first time she tried parachute training, she was petrified."

Irina spun around. "Lev, what are you discussing?"

"Just the past," he said. "Nothing in particular."

Irina pouted. "Who was petrified, exactly?"

Lev played dumb. "I'm not sure."

Irina bared her fangs at him, then whirled to Bart and Kaye. "I wasn't scared."

"I never thought you were," Bart muttered. He was worried she'd pounce on them if he said the wrong thing.

Instead of changing the topic, Kaye dug deeper. "But you overcame your acrophobia, didn't you, Irina? Even though it brought you to tears?"

Brought her to tears? Bart was puzzled.

"Did Lev say that too?" Irina asked, eyes fretful.

"No. You told the whole world so yourself," replied Kaye. "You said, 'I was also deathly afraid of heights, and that left me in tears.'"

Kaye's confidence seemed to fire an arrow into Irina's heart. The vampire girl's eyes widened. "I don't think that's *exactly* what I said..."

"I've got a fantastic memory." Kaye tapped her temple with a finger. "Word-for-word, you said, 'For the longest time, I hated humans. I despised you. I was also deathly afraid of heights, and that left me in tears. But still, I became a cosmonaut, and I did so because of Le—'"

Irina leaped at Kaye with a shriek, covering the dhampir's mouth. Her hands muffled the rest of the sentence. "That's quite enough! Let's leave it at that."

Kaye nodded, mumbling unintelligibly through Irina's hands. The vampire, now beet red, withdrew her hands and seemed suddenly tiny. Lev and Bart had to hold back their laughter.

"You had to overcome some challenges of your own, didn't you,

Bart?" Kaye asked, smirking.

The instant she drew him into the conversation, Bart stopped snickering.

"When it came to speaking to crowds, Bart was terrible," Kaye told Lev and Irina. "After Arnack One first started, we had to give speeches. But as soon as someone asked him 'What does the 'D' in D Room stand for?' he just—"

"H-hang on a second!" Bart cut in, tormented by the hellish memory. Kaye's ability to recall these moments was terrifying. "Would you please *not* tell that story right now?"

Kaye cocked her head. "I thought it'd be better to tell them before the conference," she said with a giggle. "Otherwise, they'll think something strange is going on if you suddenly freeze during our speech!"

That didn't make Bart feel any better. "I mean, okay, sometimes I freeze up. But..." Sweat beaded on his back as he realized how paralyzing it would be to propose a lunar orbit rendezvous onstage. For now, he decided to put an end to Kaye's anecdote by retaliating. "Speaking of challenges, don't you have your own to work on, Kaye?"

"Me?"

"How many times have you fallen down the stairs because your brain suddenly decided to run calculations? What if you get so carried away during your speech that you tumble offstage?"

Imagining that, Kaye squealed a little, fidgeting as she attempted to hold herself still.

Irina glanced at Lev mischievously. "When Lev is excited, he can melt ice with his words. In fact, he's so passionate about space that people call him Snow Thaw—"

"Nobody has called me that in ages!" Lev said.

Irina ignored him. "They call him Snow Thaw Lev!"

Bart eyed Lev with curiosity. "Snow Thaw?"

"That was in the past," Lev insisted.

Kaye again dug deeper. "What's it like when *he* gets carried away?"

Lev scratched the back of his head. "Uh, let's...save that for the

conference tomorrow?”

Just then, there was something like a scream, and commotion broke out on the far side of the deck. The Delivery Crew agent looked over with a sharp glare. Bart was also immediately alarmed, and Kaye looked wary.

The commotion increased. “It’s a UFO!” a voice shouted.

“Huh?” Bart said, stunned.

“A UFO?!” some nearby tourists cried.

The crowd abruptly pushed and scrambled in a wave toward the voice, moving so decisively that Bart worried the deck might tilt off balance.

Lev was equally baffled. “W-wow...”

“Where is it?!” Kaye cried.

“I want to see it!” Irina shouted.

The dhampir and vampire hurried off, the reporters and photographers rushed away to get their scoop, and the security guards hastened to protect everyone. Suddenly, most of the people who’d surrounded Bart and Lev were gone. Jennifer and the Delivery Crew agent shared a glance and a sigh, looking unimpressed.

What a mess, Bart thought, watching Kaye disappear into the crowd. “Kaye’s terrified of aliens,” he told Lev, shrugging. “Her curiosity wins out every time, though.”

“Irina isn’t afraid of them in the slightest. She says she wants to ride an alien spacecraft.”

“In that regard, they’re birds of a feather.”

“You said it.”

They both laughed.

“Irina’s way more youthful and spirited in person than on television,” Bart mused. “Then again, sometimes I forget how young she is. She’s eighteen, isn’t she?” Before meeting her, he’d imagined Irina as stuck-up, but that impression had since dissipated.

There was something thankful in Lev’s nod. “Traveling the world can be exhausting. Thanks to Irina, I can rest and take breathers. To be frank, I don’t know whether I could stand all this on my own. In

Zirnitra, we have a liquor called ‘zhizni,’ which means ‘life.’ I think, without her, zhizni really might have become my life companion.” Lev mimed taking a drink, then chuckled. “I am grateful to her.”

Bart had considered Lev something of a perfect hero, but the cosmonaut had his own worries and fears. Maybe it was presumptuous to compare himself to a global icon, but still, he thought he knew how Lev felt.

“Same here,” he said. “Thanks to Kaye, I can balance my engineering and PR duties. I’ve lost count of how often she’s saved me.”

“She’s a wonderful young woman indeed. Throughout our tour, we’ve heard many times that Arnack’s orbital flight succeeded because of Kaye.”

Hearing Lev’s praise, Bart felt a surge of pride in Kaye that made him bashful. Yet as he chatted with the calm, easygoing cosmonaut, he couldn’t help worrying about Lev’s lonely facial expression earlier. Now that they had a moment to themselves, Bart decided to take a risk.
“Um...during your tour, did something happen to you two?”

“I’m sorry?” Lev seemed confused by the unexpected question. “Every city welcomed us with open arms. We’ve had a very good time.”

“Uh, no, I mean...” Bart realized his question was missing context. “When you and Irina finished on the Moon Jump and Space Flier, you seemed like you were...I don’t know, sad. I couldn’t help thinking that maybe something bad had happened.”

Lev looked troubled, and Bart worried that perhaps he’d said too much.

“I mean, a lot of Arnackians dislike vampires and oppose the space program,” he added. “I was just wondering if they put a damper on your trip.”

“Irina and I looked sad?”

“Well, no. Although... I mean, I could be totally wrong. Um... sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Lev shifted his gaze to the evening sky for a moment, deliberating, then sighed in resignation. “It’s just... When I wonder if I’ll be able to fly to space again, my heart aches.”

“Oh...”

Lev looked over at Bart. There was a smile on his face, but something like hopelessness in his eyes. “There is no shortage of talented cosmonaut candidates in the Union, and we all share the same dream, so I cannot keep space all to myself.”

From Lev’s words and expression, Bart could tell he was in exactly the same boat as Bart’s brother, Aaron. Since Aaron was Arnack’s first astronaut, he spent most of his time educating the public and training future astronauts, which kept him from the stars. As far as ANSA’s upper management were concerned, there was no point sending him to space a second time. Mid-flight accidents were always a risk, and growing their pool of space heroes simply made more sense. The UK had already selected nine new astronauts—separate from the Hermes Seven—who were now in the middle of training.

The UZSR had never clarified how many cosmonaut candidates there were, but Bart guessed that the number was likely similar to Arnack’s. In light of that, the Moon Jump and Space Flier hadn’t just been fun attractions for Lev and Irina. They’d been proxies for dreams the cosmonauts might never again experience firsthand.

Bart remembered the words Irina had shouted in front of the whole world. *“I want to go to the moon with Lev!”* What would happen to her dream? He lowered his eyes, confused and fretful.

“Please forget what I said just now,” Lev said softly.

“Huh?”

As Lev scratched the back of his head, his eyes flashed briefly to one side. The Delivery Crew agent was eyeing him, her gaze chastening. Lev might not be allowed to discuss this subject, Bart realized. He was glad the cosmonaut had opened up to him, but thinking about Lev’s longing for space depressed him.

“Let’s make the most of the time we have here, Bart.” Flashing a warm smile, Lev let him off the hook.

Bart pushed his gloominess away. “You’re right. Sorry.” Before they changed the topic completely, however, he wanted to share one thing. He stepped closer to Lev. “My brother, Aaron... I think he must feel exactly the same as you,” he said in a low voice, wondering whether Lev would understand the quick statement’s depth.

The cosmonaut smiled wider. “Thank you. You know, it’s just as I thought. You and your brother *are* alike.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Yes—when it comes to what’s here,” Lev replied, thumping his chest.

Bart put his hand to his own chest, thinking of his brother. He’d never once heard Aaron whine or complain. Not before his spaceflight, and not now. Was Aaron sad that ANSA kept him so far from space? Bart wanted to ask him next time they met. He could be a shoulder for his brother to lean on, at the very least.

At that moment, the crowd on the far side of the observation deck broke into chatter. The UFO spotting had apparently finished. All the onlookers had long faces, including Kaye and Irina; their hopes had been dashed.

“Let’s not tell the girls that I once again claimed you are like your brother.” Lev put a finger to his lips, winking.



The friendly gesture felt like one between friends. It was Lev Leps himself, as opposed to the public-facing UZSR cosmonaut, who'd done it. Bart wasn't one to express his feelings so openly, but he told Lev, "Your secret's safe with me."

Kaye and Irina returned soon afterward, clearly crestfallen.

"Were you abducted by aliens?" Lev asked jokingly.

"Why would you say something so silly?" Irina demanded, pouting. "I was just following Kaye."

Kaye looked shocked. "You were? But you were in front of me."

Irina was silent.

"And your hair's messy from pushing through the crowd to reach the window!"

Irina prepared a retort quickly as she tidied her hair. "Y-you were the one who was so frightened that you wouldn't let go of my hand!" she exclaimed, gripping Kaye's hand to demonstrate. Kaye squeaked in surprise. "You held it just like this and cried, 'The UFO's over there!'"

"I didn't hold it *that* tightly!" With her free hand, Kaye waved off Irina's words.

Irina put her hands on her hips. "I can't believe that humans have such awful eyesight," she said with a hint of superiority. "Who sees lights reflected in a window and thinks it's a UFO?"

"When people spot UFOs, they *are* usually just optical illusions," Kaye admitted.

"So we weren't the silly ones, were we, Kaye?"

"Nope!"

The UFO kerfuffle at least seemed to have allowed the girls to drop their polite distance; they were talking more casually, like friends. Now that Kaye and Irina were on the same page, it was time for them to ensure the boys were too.

"You hear all that, Lev?" Irina asked.

"Loud and clear."

"And you, Bart?" Kaye demanded.

"Whatever you say..."

As the cosmonauts' tour of the Expo came to an end, the day's main event—dinner with Queen Sundancia herself—still loomed, ever-present.

This five-star hotel had opened at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since then, it'd received nothing but the highest praise. Huge chandeliers illuminated a breathtaking lobby decorated with exquisite furniture. Distinguished front desk staff welcomed guests and attended to their needs.

The cosmonauts' party would dine at the hotel restaurant, a top-quality establishment with a first-class chef and strict dress code. Dressed formally for the occasion, Bart and Kaye awaited Sundancia's arrival.

Bart felt uncomfortable in his suit. "I don't care how often we visit places like this," he told Kaye, throat dry. "I'll never get used to it."

"Me neither." Kaye, who usually embodied calm, looked tense. She was clearly well aware that she'd be dining with royalty. Still, she didn't appear out of place in the hotel; she wore a stunning white dress and had adorned her hair with a queen of the night flower ornament.

Jennifer could tell that they were nervous. "No slipups in front of Her Majesty, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," they said in unison.

The lobby was full of Expo attendees. Scientists and politicians presenting at the conference chatted over the lounge's live piano performance. Some guests looked out of place in the gorgeous hotel—specifically, the journalists and photographers looking for snippets and snapshots from the queen's introduction to the Zirnitran cosmonauts.

Lev and Irina were having their picture taken in the middle of the lobby. Irina wore a black dress, and the blue jewel on her necklace sparkled in the light. Kaye was hoping to see the necklace up close, having only ever glimpsed it on television. She'd told Bart that its stone glittered like her mother's ring had before her murderer stole it.

"It's the queen!"

As the gathered media chattered excitedly, the royal secretary led Sundancia into the hotel lobby. The queen wore an elegant yellow gown, and her presence alone lit up the room. Bart and Kaye immediately stood a little straighter, and those sitting on the sofas rose to their feet.

Sundancia walked calmly toward Lev and Irina, standing before them as camera flashbulbs popped. The cosmonauts bowed respectfully, and Sundancia replied with a gentle smile and a quick head dip of her own.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” She reached out to Lev. “I am Sundancia Sophie Alicia.”

Lev shook her hand. “I am Zirnitra Union cosmonaut Lev Leps. It is an honor, Your Majesty.”

Then the queen offered a hand to Irina. The vampire girl likewise shook it and introduced herself: “I am Lilitto Republic cosmonaut Irina Luminesk.”

As he watched the introduction, Bart got the impression that Irina’s dignified air measured up to even the queen’s. Still, the two young women’s demeanors were entirely different. Sundancia embodied the sun’s warmth; Irina, the isolation of the moon.

From the way Irina stared straight into Sundancia’s eyes, Bart guessed that the vampire girl had no intention of showing deference to even the most powerful humans. The young queen gazed back silently, apparently sensing Irina’s intensity. She and Irina were the same age, yet their different races and upbringings made them emblematic of their respective nations’ histories.

Once the photographers finished snapping the cosmonauts with the queen, it was Bart and Kaye’s turn to greet Sundancia.

“It’s nice to see you again,” she told them. “We haven’t met since last autumn’s ceremony.”

“We’re honored you remember us,” Bart responded.

Last fall, Bart had been like a robot. He felt a touch more relaxed this time around. His hand didn’t even tremble as he shook the queen’s. Kaye seemed more comfortable as well, and she smiled naturally from ear to ear.

The greetings went off without a hitch, and everyone headed to

the restaurant. Their dinner would be held in a spacious private room usually reserved for weddings. Beautiful carvings decorated the walls, and classical music drifted through the air. A server seated Bart, Kaye, Lev, Irina, and Sundancia at one of the many round tables. Attendants and staff representing the UK, the UZSR, and the palace were seated at similar tables nearby. With the media gone, and only official reporters in attendance, the room was pleasantly quiet.

As he sat down, Bart broke into a cold sweat. In front of him was more cutlery than he'd ever seen. With his stomach in knots, he prayed he could use it all correctly. He looked to Kaye for support, but when he met her gaze, his weren't the only eyes crying out for help. She needed assistance just as badly as he did.

"When we don't know what to do, we'll just copy the others," he told her.

"All right. Let's try not to mess up!" The dinner was scheduled to last two hours, so they just needed to focus on navigating that period safely.

As servers arrived to take their drink orders, Sundancia made an announcement to the table: "We're serving a very special sparkling wine just for this evening."

The royal family had apparently provided the priceless luxury beverage. Bart wasn't a connoisseur of fine wines, but he wasn't about to turn it down. Kaye also decided to indulge in a glass.

"I'm eighteen, Lev," Irina was telling her partner.

"You still aren't allowed."

"It's 'sparkling' wine, so it's kind of like soda water, right? That sounds delicious."

"I said no. We don't want to cause a fuss."

Irina slumped, pouting.

"May I ask what you mean by 'cause a fuss'?" Kaye asked.

According to Lev, the legal drinking age was twenty in Lilitto, although it was eighteen in the UK. Irina wasn't too accustomed to alcohol. She protested, but Lev's mind was made up.

"You certainly don't want to see her tipsy," he said. "Not someplace like this, anyway."

Rather than arguing that point, Irina fidgeted with the edge of the tablecloth in front of her. Bart wondered if she was the type of drinker prone to outbursts and tears.

“Why not try something nonalcoholic?” Lev asked to placate the frustrated Irina. “This restaurant stocks any number of carbonated drinks.”

“Fine,” said Irina, defeated.

“You like carbonated beverages?” Sundancia asked curiously.

“That’s right. I’ve tried them everywhere Lev and I traveled. At this point, I’ve probably sampled close to a hundred varieties.”

Irina’s answer was polite but not especially obsequious. The way she carried herself suggested to Bart that she viewed herself as equal to the queen. Still, learning that Irina liked soda so much surprised him.

Sundancia looked equally startled. “A hundred?”

Irina put a hand to her chin, thinking. “I feel that Arnack’s soda waters are comparatively fizzy,” she declared, sounding like a professional critic. “I don’t really enjoy the artificial colors and flavors they often include, but they’re refreshing nonetheless.”

Kaye leaned forward, curious. “Of all the beverages you’ve tasted around the world, which was most delicious?”

“Zirnitran lemon seltzer,” Irina replied without a hint of hesitation.

Her response seemed off the cuff, although Kaye’s question might just have been a chance for Irina to boast about her own nation. At least, Bart thought so until he saw Lev’s grin. That made him wonder if there was more to Irina’s answer, and he decided to ask. “What is it, Lev?”

“Oh, uh, nothing,” Lev replied. “A jazz bar near our training center offers excellent lemon seltzer. Unfortunately, it’s a national secret, so I can’t invite you for a drink.”

He and Irina shared a glance, then spoke no further on the subject. In the end, Irina gave up on the sparkling wine, reluctantly ordering apple soda instead.

Sundancia took the opportunity to make a suggestion. “Why don’t we all toast with apple soda? We can indulge in wine afterward.” Her

consideration clearly made Irina feel a little awkward, but nobody disagreed.

Before they clinked glasses, Lev said a few words. “Thank you all very much for inviting us to such a wonderful dinner this evening.”

“Let’s raise our glasses to our nations’ relationship, and to both nations’ ongoing success,” Sundancia added.

“Cheers!” everyone said in unison.

With that, their spectacular dinner began. The menu focused on local seafood delicacies, including crab cake appetizers, fresh oysters, salmon fillets, and a variety of clams. As they finished their apple soda, people ordered other drinks. The light-pink sparkling wine was as delicious as it was pretty.

Bart was so focused on proper table manners, however, that he could barely savor the food he was served. Kaye, too, looked so awkward that she might as well have used a saw and screwdriver instead of her knife and fork. Sundancia, on the other hand, ate with natural grace; so did Lev and Irina, who were well practiced by now. Irina made sure to smell every dish placed before her. Bart knew that vampires lacked a sense of taste. He wondered if scent was how they enjoyed food.

Irina slid Lev’s sparkling wine closer to herself. “It smells so good.”

Lev promptly set it out of her reach. “I said no.”

“Do you appreciate meals using your sense of smell?” Sundancia asked the pouting Irina.

“That and texture. I like the mouthfeel of these clams,” Irina replied. She turned toward Kaye. “And you? Dhampirs can taste food, can’t they?”

Kaye nodded. “Yes, but human seasoning tends to seem bland by our standards. We enjoy ketchup and spice. At lunch today, though, I had an incident with a spice called ‘wasabi.’” Her eyes watered. “I can still feel it in my nose when I think about it.”

She had once told Bart that shocking moments impressed themselves on her eidetic memory. There was every chance she’d remember encountering wasabi for the rest of her life.

“Lev? Irina? During your flights, did you see space fireflies?”

Sundancia asked, her face flushed from the wine. “Astronaut Steve Howard witnessed that puzzling phenomenon.”

Lev shook his head sadly. “Neither I nor Irina witnessed them, unfortunately.”

“I see. I wonder what they are? Perhaps some sort of UFO? I heard there was quite a commotion at the Expo regarding one earlier this afternoon.”

Having been there themselves, Bart, Kaye, and the cosmonauts shared a wry grin.

Space and the stars seemed to intrigue Sundancia—so much so that she’d stopped eating entirely. “We’ll solve these mysteries as we make our way to the moon, won’t we?” she asked. “Irina, you said during the UZSR’s celebration that you’d visit the moon with Lev, didn’t you? I remember that so well.”

“Um...yes.” Irina sipped her soda dejectedly, looking down at her hands. Her expression suggested that she didn’t feel like saying much more, likely because there were no actual plans for that flight yet.

Sundancia, however, was blissfully unaware of Irina’s worries. “At the press conference the other day, you two mentioned that the Union would aim for a lunar landing by 1967!”

Lev picked up the conversational baton for the silent, disheartened Irina. “Well, the path to the moon is a long one. I admit, it would be wonderful to reach it in seconds, as the Space Flier’s audience does. Speaking of which, have you had a chance to visit the Space Flier yourself, Your Majesty?”

“Not yet, no,” Sundancia replied. “I’m scheduled to explore the pavilions the day after tomorrow.”

Kaye had listened to the whole conversation quietly. Seeming to realize something, she turned to Bart. “Do the cosmonauts have the same problem as Aaron?” she whispered.

“It seems so.”

“Oh.” She heaved a sigh of despair, understanding now that the two cosmonauts had been grounded.

An Arnackian politician at another table was called away to take a phone call, but otherwise, the conversation everywhere flowed smoothly—except at the main table, which was completely silent, as if

time had stopped completely. The topic of space was sensitive, and not just because of Lev and Irina. The moment anyone uttered a word related to space travel, they felt the cold, sharp gaze of the Delivery Crew agent seated nearby.

As Bart ate his tuna steak, he racked his brain. *What can we talk about?*

Then Kaye timidly broached a new subject. “Um, Irina...may I ask about your necklace?”

Everyone looked at the blue stone glittering on Irina’s collarbone.

“What about it?” The vampire touched the stone gently, as if shielding it from their gazes.

“My mother had a jewel just like it,” Kaye said softly. “But it’s... gone now.”

“Your mother, you say?” Irina’s expression grew troubled.

She probably knew that Kaye’s mother, Liberté Scarlet, had died at the hands of humans. Kaye hadn’t said anything about it publicly, but activists referenced the murder while protesting discrimination. She’d told Bart that she felt conflicted about that. She disliked the attention but held out hope that, if more people knew about the incident, she might one day reclaim her mother’s stolen ring.

Kaye showed none of that sadness as she smiled. “If it’s all right with you, may I take a closer look at it?”

Irina thought for a moment. “All right.”

She took off the necklace and passed it to Lev, whose brows shot up as he handed it to Kaye. The dhampir girl held it in her palm as if handling a priceless treasure. The blue jewel glowed wondrously under the chandeliers, its light glittering in Kaye’s eyes.



"It sparkles like my mother's ring," she murmured. Her voice trembled, and she teared up, perhaps remembering Liberté.

Sundancia sipped her wine and gazed into the distance, not looking closely at the jewel but giving off an air of interest.

"That stone has been passed through my family for generations," Irina told Kaye. "It's called a lunny kamen."

Kaye lifted her eyes to look into Irina's. "It's so strange to think we've been so far apart, and yet..."

"And yet..." Irina nodded.

The connection in their shared gaze surpassed time and place, linking the two young women with red eyes. It was something no human could grasp—a bond of blood no one else could be part of. Silence once more fell over the table, and the world only seemed to return to normal when the restaurant staff served the next course.

Kaye handed the necklace back to Irina, smiling. "I'm sorry I brought up such a sad topic. Let's change the subject, shall we?"

It wasn't like they had much success discussing space, though.

Then Lev apparently remembered something. He looked at Sundancia. "How is Kukushka?"

"She's doing very well! She seemed terribly lonely at first, but now she's a happy member of the royal dog family."

"That's wonderful. Isn't it, Irina?"

"Yes." Irina's smile as she put her necklace back on was like that of a parent or pet owner.

"Is there some connection between you and Kukushka?" Sundancia asked.

"None at all, actually," said Irina. "But since I learned about her, I've been worried! I'm glad she's well."

Irina said nothing more and instead began devouring her main course. After that, the table made small talk. At Sundancia's request, Bart and Kaye discussed computers, and Lev and Irina described their journey across the Arnackian continent. The chatter was simple and easy, and everyone grew a little closer as the dinner wrapped up.

It was the end of a very long day. Bart and Kaye, exhausted, headed onto the hotel patio to get away from things. They walked the lamplit path to a bench near the fountain, which was decorated with lights. It was just them and the refreshing spring breeze.

“Looks like autographs aren’t in the cards tonight,” Kaye said, her shoulders slumping.

She and Bart had both hoped to have the cosmonauts autograph their books, but scientists and politicians crowded Lev and Irina the moment they entered the lobby. For a while, Bart and Kaye had waited for things to die down, but the lobby was so packed with government employees and ANSA staff that they elected to get some fresh air instead.

“There’s always tomorrow,” said Bart.

“Yes, but why does this country bother with the ‘down with the UZSR’ pretense? I understand scientists and researchers wanting to talk to Lev and Irina, but even bureaucrats were clamoring for handshakes!”

“You have to wonder who started the whole anti-Zirnitran attitude, don’t you?”

“Maybe it was that UZSR-hating Division Chief Da—erk!” Kaye tripped on a stone step as she spoke. She didn’t fall, but she wobbled on her feet.

“Are you okay?” asked Bart. “You drank quite a bit.”

“I didn’t even realize it. That wine was so tasty.”

In fact, Kaye had drunk six glasses. As she poked her tongue out at Bart, her cheeks were flushed light pink. Bart himself stopped at a single glass—his alcohol tolerance had never been high—and even *he* was aware of drink coursing through him. He couldn’t imagine how he’d feel after six glasses.

“You’re a pretty heavy drinker,” he noted.

“I guess I get it from my dad. He drinks moonshine almost every night.”

Bart pictured Kaye’s father Dominic, a stern dhampir with a shaved head. Dominic sometimes turned up at PR events; when he did,

he glared daggers at Bart. “I guess he still hates the space program?”

Putting on a frown, Kaye mimicked her father. “You can’t eat space fireflies!”

Apparently, Dominic still wasn’t completely on board with his daughter’s career. “But in his heart, he’s cheering you on, isn’t he?”

“Er, maybe. I don’t know if ‘cheering’ is...uh...” Kaye suddenly trailed off.

“Something wrong?”

“Um...” Kaye looked away, her face reddening for reasons unknown.

“You’re blushing,” Bart said.

“Wha...?” Kaye put her hands to her cheeks. “It must be the wine.” Her excuse wasn’t particularly convincing.

“Was your dad against you attending the Expo with me?”

“What?! No!”

Obviously, he had been. Bart understood Dominic’s feelings. His beloved daughter wandering around the Expo with a hated enemy would’ve seemed practically unbearable.

“This is work,” Kaye insisted. “It isn’t like we’re lovers running off together!”

“Huh? What’re you talking abou—”

Kaye’s eyes widened at the words she’d just spoken. “I declare this topic closed!” she shouted, hurriedly cutting him off.

“Uh, okay,” Bart said. He didn’t intend to dig into her family affairs, and she and her father at least seemed *mostly* on the same page. “If he did think we were eloping, he’d slap me silly. So, could you watch out for that? For my sake?”

“There won’t be any misunderstandings! Can we please change the subject now?! ”

As Bart and Kaye chatted on the bench by the fountain, a heavy explosion echoed some distance away.

“Over there!” Kaye pointed into the sky. The vibrant, colorful fireworks display lighting up the Space Tower signaled the end of the Expo for the day.

"We saw so many displays and attractions today," Bart said, thinking back on all his and Kaye's activities. "I just wish we could've spent more time getting a better look at them."

Tomorrow, they'd be busy with the conference. After that, they had to head straight home.

"I'd like to visit again, outside of work. On a day off, maybe."

Kaye nodded. "I had the same thought."

Could we go together? Bart considered jokingly inviting Kaye—maybe he'd even call it a chance to "elope." His fear of rejection was too great, however, so he simply stared up at the fireworks.

Kaye glanced at him. "Hey, Bart. If you came to the Expo on your own time..."

"Mm-hmm?"

"Would you visit Showtime Street?"

"Huh?!" She was dredging up the dreaded topic Jennifer had taunted him about earlier. "I already told you, I never said I wanted to go!" he cried.

Kaye didn't look convinced. "I know you didn't say it. But I'm asking if, somewhere deep down, you want to check it out."

She saw right through him. "Erm, I, uh..." Bart stammered, fixing his glasses as he struggled for an excuse.

Kaye held up a finger and shook her head, her face still flushed. "Don't get me wrong. If you want to go, I won't hold that against you. I was just curious because you went nuts denying it to Jennifer."

"Went nuts...?"

"Yep. You know. Like you did just now."

Bart tried to brush her off. "Gee, these fireworks sure are something, huh?"

But Kaye wasn't watching the fireworks—she was staring at Bart's face. "You want to go, don't you?"

"Please, Kaye," he muttered, again trying to shrug her off. "Just..." He couldn't look her in the eye.

Kaye elbowed his arm and kept pushing, probably spurred on by all the wine. "Why not go now? If you run, you could make it before the

fireworks finish.”

Suddenly tired of being on the defense, Bart retorted, “Well, what about *you*, then? As soon as Jennifer mentioned ‘worldly desires,’ you started fidgeting!”

Kaye immediately lost her cool. “I-I wasn’t f-fidgeting!”

“Maybe you flipped out about us ‘eloping’ because those worldly desires run rampant in your imagination!”

“Look who’s talking! I saw that grin when you fell on me at the restaurant!”

“What?!” Without thinking, Bart glanced at Kaye’s chest.

“See?!” She glared, narrowing her eyes in suspicion. “And don’t think I didn’t see you ogle my legs on the Moon Jump!”

He had to respond; Kaye had backed him into a corner. “My only desires are for space!”

It was a horrible excuse.

Kaye’s cheeks puffed up. “Liar! You’ve thought about it! Confess!”

“Huh?!” If he did, he’d be admitting that he dreamed about Kaye herself. It was true that Bart had imagined her biting him as part of a pinky blood oath, but he was sure that telling her so would give her the creeps. “Well, I, er...” He fumbled with what to say.

“Ack!” Suddenly, Kaye gasped in surprise and clamped her mouth shut. She grabbed her skirt hem, her face going beet red. In trying to trap Bart, she’d basically exposed *herself* as well. As fireworks exploded in the distance, the pair fell silent.

“Uh...shall we give this topic a rest?” asked Bart.

Kaye bobbed her head. They’d have to settle for a draw.

Bart cleared his throat, desperate to get them out of the awkward fog they’d found themselves in. “Want to talk about the conference? I was actually hoping to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

Sighing in tandem, they put their game faces on, and Bart immediately explained everything he’d contemplated in the Space Flier. “I really think ANSA should reconsider the lunar orbit rendezvous method. I want to propose that tomorrow.”

“What?!” Kaye’s eyes widened.

“It’s not in any conference materials, and I don’t think anyone will bring it up. I really believe it’s the best method, though. Everyone rejected it before because they thought it’d be way too hard to rendezvous and dock on the far side of the moon.”

“They agreed that we lacked the technology and couldn’t rely on the computers, right?” She raised a good point.

Bart nodded. “Yes, exactly. But computers are improving at an astounding speed. In just a few years, we’ll probably be able to do complex operations on the far side of the moon.”

“You mean, what’s impossible today is possible tomorrow?”

He’d wanted to say exactly that. When Kaye took the line, Bart was suddenly flustered. “Uh, yep.”

She couldn’t hide her smile. “Honestly, the whole time we were in the Space Flier, I was thinking about a lunar orbit rendezvous too.”

“You were?!” Bart practically shouted; he couldn’t believe it.

Kaye laughed. “When I spaced out at the end, it wasn’t because I left part of myself two billion light-years away. I was on the moon the whole time!”

“The moon?”

“Mm-hmm. I was imagining a moon landing. I know that’s still impossible, but seeing the twenty-first century up close, I really feel like we can do anything. Even *Fly Me to the Moon*’s science fiction world might be real one day!” Gripping Bart’s arm, Kaye stood.

“Huh? What’s the matter?”

“I’m setting the Blue Angel’s route to the moon!”

“What?” Bart asked, perplexed.

Kaye pointed at the illuminated fountain nearby, shooting Bart a playful wink. “The spacecraft’s lifting off. Are you ready?”

There was something familiar about her tone. Then it hit him—she was mimicking the Space Flier’s narrator. “Oh!”

Kaye would never have done anything like this under normal circumstances. But the world of the twenty-first century and the starlight inside the sparkling wine had cast a spell on her—and the

magic was contagious. Bart was now aboard Kaye's twenty-first century spaceship. The illuminated fountain was a golden moon, and the lights along the footpath were their runway.

“Are you taking me to the moon?”

“Mm-hmm! We'll land via lunar orbit rendezvous. Ready for takeoff! Let the countdown begin!”

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one...liftoff.”

Taking Bart's hand, Kaye led him toward the “moon” with light and uneven steps. “This is Blue Angel,” she said, as if through a radio. “We've reached escape velocity and broken through the atmosphere. The flight's proceeding as planned!”

Although Bart was right next to her, he stood in for the mission control center. “Blue Angel, this is Laika Crescent. Do you see any space fireflies?”

Fireworks flew into the air, exploding in showers of color that lit up the golden fountain.

“This is Blue Angel,” said Kaye. “I can report seeing an excess of supernova explosions!”

“Understood. Please be on the lookout for UFO attacks.”

Kaye giggled. “Roger that. I'll ensure they don't steal any butter cookies!”

They drew closer to the “moon.”

“The ship is now entering lunar orbit.” Kaye and Bart slowly lapped the fountain, and then Kaye added, “Releasing the lunar lander.”

She pushed Bart gently, and he walked toward the fountain.

“Lunar lander detached,” Kaye announced. As Bart reached the fountain, she said, “Landing successful!”

The moon's bright surface was rough and cool to the touch. Through the misty spray, Bart saw Kaye orbiting the fountain. She twirled occasionally as she walked, a wide smile on her face.

As she returned to her starting point, she sent a radio transmission. “This is Blue Angel, requesting the return launch of the lunar lander.”

“Understood,” replied Bart. He left the moon and approached

Kaye, rejoining her side.

“Orbital rendezvous successful.” Kaye reached out a hand to him. “Engaging docking.” Bart extended his own hand to take Kaye’s, but she suddenly left her “orbit” and dashed away. “This is Blue Angel! We’ve got a system error! We can’t lower our speed!”

“Huh? Wait!” Bart ran after her.

Kaye snaked along, smiling brightly, as she headed back to the bench where they’d first sat. Bart prepared to finally “dock” at the bench himself, reaching toward Kaye, when she suddenly engaged the emergency brakes. “Huh?!”

“Wha—?!” Unable to stop, Bart ran into her, his arms wrapping around her. When he spotted a young woman over Kaye’s shoulder, his breath caught in his throat. “Your Majesty?!”

The queen had changed into a simple dress. She stood in front of them, apparently unsure of what to say.

What’s she doing here all alone? Shock locked Bart in place with Kaye in his arms. Kaye didn’t move either.

Sundancia stepped backward with an awkward, embarrassed look. “I’m so sorry. Am I intruding on something?”

“Huh?” Bart said. Then he yelped in surprise, releasing Kaye, and slid his glasses back into place.

Kaye tidied her messy hair and stood straight, her tipsiness draining away in an instant.

“Uh, Your Majesty, about what Kaye and I were just doing...” The queen peered at them curiously as Bart scrambled for an excuse. “We were, uh...working through a simulation. But there was an error.”

“A simulation?” Sundancia repeated. “An error?”

“Y-yes!” cried Kaye, desperate to back him up. “That was just an error!”

Their words only bewildered the queen further. “If it’s better that I return later, I can.”

“No, that’s fine! We’re here at your humble service, My Majesty!” Bart was so panicked, he forgot how to address her. There was no way they could let her leave with this misunderstanding hanging in the air.

A smile drifted onto Sundancia’s lips as she regarded the two

engineers. They both sweated nervously, doing their best to look respectable. “I came looking for you because we only spoke briefly about the space program at dinner,” the queen explained, her words entirely unexpected. “I hoped to discuss it further.”

Bart turned to Kaye, who met his gaze. They obviously had no reason to turn the queen down. “Erm...if you’d like.”

Sundancia smiled. “Very much so.”

“Shall we move to the lounge?” They were speaking to the nation’s monarch; they didn’t want to be rude by assuming she’d just chat with them in the gardens.

However, Sundancia assured them that she was fine there. “It’s difficult to relax in the lobby or lounge. Even discounting my royal attendants, there are so many people.” Naturally, in the middle of them all, the queen was sure to draw attention.

Since Sundancia wanted to speak in the garden, the three found an L-shaped bench and sat down.

“Despite my attending this conference, I regret to admit that my knowledge of the space program is terribly shallow,” said the queen. “I’m very interested in space development. I’d love to study it further myself, but I have so many public duties.”

According to Sundancia, all she’d received before the conference were a few documents on different session topics. Outside of those, she knew only as much about space as the general public had learned from television programs. But Bart didn’t hold her lack of knowledge against her. After all, she wasn’t an astronautical specialist.

The queen herself seemed dissatisfied, however. “My secretary tells me my level of knowledge is fine, since I’m only attending the conference as an observer. I suppose he’s correct, but I found myself feeling uneasy at dinner.”

“Really?”

Sundancia nodded, her face worried. “If you know why the Zirnitran cosmonauts seemed so dejected, would you kindly tell me? I can’t help wondering whether it was something I said.”

When the subject had turned to space travel and the moon during dinner, Lev and Irina were somewhat withdrawn. It was easy to imagine that worrying the queen, who wasn’t aware that they might not be able

to fly again. Bart knew it would arguably be better to be discreet about the cosmonauts' position, but he needed to assuage Sundancia's concerns. He told her what he'd heard from Lev openly and honestly.

"Oh my. I had no idea." The queen's shoulders slumped. "Still, I hurt their feelings."

It seemed possible that Sundancia was cautious about every word she said, given her lofty position. Living that way would put so much strain on one's heart. Bart thought, were he in the queen's shoes, he might well fall into despair and stop talking altogether.

"You couldn't have known, Your Majesty," said Kaye. "I really doubt they'll dwell on it."

"I do hope not." Sundancia turned to Bart. "In any case, I deeply appreciate your explanation. I'm somewhat relieved."

There wasn't a hint of arrogance in the young queen's honest thanks. It struck Bart as funny that he'd been so nervous before dinner, yet now he was sitting side by side with Sundancia on a bench, talking away. He realized she had none of the imposing dignity of her father, the Sun King. Then again, an eighteen-year-old who exuded such an aura would've been terrifying.

At any rate, Bart was glad the space program interested Sundancia. He felt honored to answer her questions. "Would you like to know anything else?"

"How is Project Hyperion progressing?"

"Project Hyperion? Well..."

"Smoothly, I hope?"

Bart wasn't sure what to say. Like ANSA's failed attempts to photograph the lunar surface, the project had been delayed on all fronts. On top of that, wouldn't hearing about all the infighting behind the scenes disappoint the queen? He glanced at Kaye, pleading for support.

Kaye offered a nod. "Project Hyperion is developing steadily," she told Sundancia, reining in her own feelings to give something of a report. "But ANSA needs to overcome a myriad of challenges."

"Taking pictures of the moon's surface, for example?" asked the queen.

“Yes, but there’s no end to the problems we’re facing. We need to figure out how to get more than one person into a single spacecraft, develop an autopilot system, and ensure a successful rendezvous following activities outside the spaceship. We run simulation after simulation and try to learn from our mistakes.”

“Um, when you say ‘rendezvous’...” the queen ventured, and Bart and Kaye exchanged glances. “Is that what you were doing around the fountain earlier?”

Kaye fidgeted, and Bart gasped. *Wait... She didn’t just see us, she heard us too?! How embarrassing!*

The queen was still curious. She tapped Bart’s arm. “That is what you said, wasn’t it? That it was a ‘simulation’?”

Bart felt he had no choice but to explain fully. He was talking to the queen here. “Kaye and I were, uh...running through a lunar landing method called ‘lunar orbit rendezvous.’”

“*Lunar orbit?*”

Sundancia peered at the starry sky, but even when she racked her brain, she couldn’t recall the term. She cocked her head, puzzled. “Are you sure you don’t mean *Earth orbit rendezvous*? This is the first I’ve heard of a lunar method, I believe. I don’t think my conference materials mentioned it.”

The queen had overlooked Bart and Kaye’s silliness around the fountain and instead asked a question about engineering. Bart realized she could do so because she’d read *and* understood the conference documents. “You’re right. Lunar orbit rendezvous won’t be discussed.”

“Then why run through it?” Sundancia leaned forward, her expression serious. When she said she was interested in the space program, she hadn’t been joking.

In light of that, Bart thought it best to be honest with her. “Can you keep what I’m about to tell you secret?” He went on to explain that factions within ANSA were clashing over lunar landing methods and that the LOR had been rejected—hence its absence.

Sundancia still wasn’t quite following. She brought a hand to her cheek. “So...you *won’t* be bringing it up tomorrow?”

Since the queen saw the situation from the outside, she could ask that question easily, but it felt like a dagger in Bart’s heart. For a

moment, he debated whether to answer, then pressed on to make things perfectly clear. “Lunar orbit rendezvous was already proposed and considered once before, and ANSA wound up rejecting it. But to tell you the truth, while Kaye and I toured the Expo, it struck me that that method’s still feasible. We just don’t have data to prove that to other attendees, so now might not be the best time to propose it.” Bart glanced over at Kaye. If they thought calmly, that was the decision facing them.

Kaye nodded sadly. “Bringing up something no one’s prepared for could just derail the conference. We might make things worse for ourselves *and* our proposal.”

“If ANSA settles on the Earth orbit rendezvous Professor Klaus is pushing, Project Hyperion will proceed toward that goal,” Bart told the queen. “If not, we can reconsider proposing a lunar rendezvous.”

Sundancia nodded. She seemed to grasp their situation now. “In any case,” she said, her voice low, “it won’t be an easy path to the moon.”

Bart didn’t want her to think that meant it was *impossible* or to leave her with a pessimistic impression of what ANSA was working toward. “That’s why we’re doing it,” he said. “*Because* it won’t be easy.”

Sundancia lifted her head to look at him.

“I know some people see the space program as a waste of the national budget,” he went on. “But as long as travel through space is possible, I want to try, however challenging.”

“ANSA’s only taken the first steps,” Kaye added. “We’ll lose our way sometimes, but with each step, we get closer to the future we all imagine.”

Their passion seemed to impress Sundancia. She looked up at the sky. “I read *Fly Me to the Moon*, you know. Just as the Blue Angel overcame hurdles to reach the moon, I pray your efforts will likewise succeed.”

“You like science fiction, Your Majesty?” Bart was shocked to hear that Sundancia had read one of his favorite books.

“Space has intrigued me ever since the first satellite launched,” she replied. “I don’t have time to enjoy science fiction novels often, now that I’m queen. But sometimes, at the end of the day, I indulge in

dreams of space travel while stargazing with my dogs.”

Bart had always felt that he and the queen lived worlds apart, yet this made him feel a kinship with her.

Sundancia looked at Bart and Kaye. “There are manned interplanetary flights in *Fly Me to the Moon*. How realistic is that?”

Bart chuckled. “I think those will be developed in the very distant future. We’re only just discovering the conditions on Mars.”

“Oh, I see. If UFOs really are visiting Earth, the species piloting them must have access to incredible technology.”

Struck by Sundancia’s serious expression, Kaye leaned forward. “Do you believe in UFOs, Your Majesty?!”

“No. Not really,” Sundancia answered immediately.

At that, Kaye giggled and sat up straight, an awkward look on her face. “No! Of course not.”

“But sometimes I imagine that, if I were abducted...”

Bart and Kaye shared a look—aliens abducting the queen would be a fiasco.

Realizing what she’d said, the queen covered her mouth. “Um... please forget I raised this topic.”

Gloom hung over her, but they couldn’t deny her. It wasn’t like aliens were actually threatening the queen; she’d probably just been making a silly joke.

Sundancia pretended not to notice their confusion. “By the way, I’d like to ask you two quite a bit about computers. Do you mind?”

“Not in the slightest!” Kaye exclaimed.

The queen posed a few questions, and Kaye explained with zeal. The queen nodded along like a student at a science lecture, her eyes wide in childlike wonder.

“FORX is a high-level programming language?” she asked. “In that case, are there low-level languages as well?”

“Yes, but they’re machine languages. That makes them really tricky.”

“Machine languages?”

Sundancia was asking the same questions Bart had when he

started at D Room. The queen was hungry for knowledge. Remove the crown, and she was just another girl—a peer to the average college freshman.

Her bubbling curiosity reminded Bart of his own college days at the very dawn of space development. Back then, humans had yet to even launch a satellite, and ANSA was still an aviation committee. Bart had been obsessed with his studies and research; he'd known nothing of the world outside them. He couldn't imagine being crowned monarch of a whole country back then. He would've buckled physically and mentally under the pressure.

Bart didn't know anything about the queen's personal life, but he got the impression it was very limiting, since she didn't even have time to read the books she liked.

Sundancia listened carefully to Kaye's explanations. When the dhampir girl brought up the city of Laika Crescent, the queen lowered her voice in concern. "Um, Kaye...?"

"Yes?"

"Have things improved since your protest march last autumn?" Sundancia didn't say it outright, but her uncertain eyes made it clear that the ongoing anti-dhampir discrimination saddened her.

Kaye chose her words carefully. "Thank you for your concern. I'm glad to see ANSA hiring more dhampir engineers these days. Life for dhampirs hasn't improved much, though. I'm sorry, but telling you otherwise would be lying."

"Ah... I see." The young queen fell silent, brow furrowed.

"We're all concentrating on the future, though," Kaye smiled. "In fact, I started a science club for dhampir children, and they're very enthusiastic! Right, Bart?"

Not long ago, the idea of launching a compact satellite with dhampir children would've been unimaginable. Bart felt a passionate fire in his core as he thought back to the protest.

"I'm glad we risked holding the march," he replied. "If we hadn't, I'm sure we would've regretted it."

"Bart saved me," Kaye told the queen softly. "He really did. I'm at the conference, telling the world how much I love space, because of him."

Unable to handle Kaye's praise, Bart nervously fixed his glasses and ran his hand through his hair. "Well, I...uh..."

"Speaking with you two, I'm truly confident that human-dhampir relations will improve." Putting a hand to her chest, Sundancia sighed in relief. "Neither of you put on a front for your public relations work. Your relationship's wonderful—you respect and trust each other."

Her earnest words flustered Bart further. "Y-you're f-far too kind. I, uh...I think that's mainly because we're like comrades-in-arms, reaching for the same dreams." He looked over at his partner.

Kaye nodded, slightly tearful. "I think so too!"

"I so hope that the UK will develop a good relationship with Zirnitra," Sundancia continued, but there was a hint of loneliness in her voice. "Even if we share smiles with Lev and Irina, though, aren't we ultimately rivals?"

Bart considered that line of thought a mistake. He and Kaye, at least, saw Lev and Irina as peers—again, as comrades-in-arms. He knew blurting out an objection to the opinion of Arnack's queen herself would be incredibly rude. Yet he also knew he might never talk with Sundancia so intimately again, and he desperately wanted her to see things from a different perspective. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, Kaye and I aren't really interested in competing with Zirnitra."

"I'm sorry? You aren't?" Another misunderstanding was taking root in Sundancia.

Bart hurried to explain himself. "Please keep in mind that I wouldn't be all right with us losing. But, uh..."

Kaye took over for the stammering Bart. "If we're competing with the cosmonauts, it's in pursuit of a shared goal. Now that I've met Lev and Irina, I'm sure we share the same feelings about outer space and the stars above."

Sundancia still looked uneasy. "Is cooperative space development really possible, though?"

Bart and Kaye weren't sure how to respond. Unfortunately, it was true that the treaties between the UK and UZSR had yielded very few—if any—results.

"I think it is, yes," Bart said weakly. "Setting aside political problems."

Sundancia looked at the ground and bit her lip, falling silent. Political problems were the foremost barrier to cooperation; she couldn't simply discount them.

"I'm sorry." Bart worried that he'd been too blunt. "Please don't think I'm criticizing our government."

Sundancia shook her head. "No, you're completely right."

"Huh?"

"A number of obstacles stand in our way," the queen said earnestly. "Still, I pray for our space program's success, for improved human-dhampir relations, and for cooperative development between the UK and UZSR."

"Your Majesty..." Bart and Kaye were surprised and delighted by her response.

"It moved me to see you two on the news, marching with your banners," said Sundancia, a touch of envy in her eyes. "At the commemoration ceremony, I couldn't speak much with either of you, but I was worried about a number of things. I'm glad we spoke today, though. As Arnack's queen, I can't fully speak my mind during public gatherings. Nevertheless, if there are any small ways I can help—"

A stern exclamation interrupted her. "Oh! *There* you are!"

Bart, Kaye, and Sundancia turned to see the royal secretary running toward them with a furious expression.

The queen gasped and put a hand to her mouth. "My apologies! I merely went for a walk."

Her secretary made no attempt to hide his panic. "You must return at once!"

The conference attendees had gathered in the hotel bar. Everyone's eyes were on the television, which was playing an emergency report from the government.

From his office, the prime minister addressed the UK's citizens, his face tense. "*The UK has received proof that the UZSR is constructing numerous offensive missile sites on Imprisoned Island.*"

Imprisoned Island, which had deep ties to Zirnitra, was located just a hundred and fifty kilometers from southern Arnack. The television set showed a photo shot by a reconnaissance aircraft; it depicted ominous objects in one of Imprisoned Island's deep forests. The bar was completely silent.

Although the prime minister looked sweaty and exhausted, he detailed the crisis before them in a flat, even tone. *"We're currently aware of six short-range missile sites and a further three sites, not yet completed, for medium-range missiles."*

Short-range missiles, he explained, could strike southeast Arnack, including Laika Crescent. Medium-range missiles could fly two thousand kilometers, so Marine City—located on Arnack's northwestern tip—would be just out of range. That, however, was no consolation to the rest of the country.

Kaye couldn't move. Bart, too, froze completely in shock. Sundancia held a handkerchief to her mouth, her face white.

The prime minister's expression was calm, but as he went on, rage bubbled into his voice. *"Only last month, the UZSR's government publicly stated, and I quote, 'Since the Union has access to powerful rockets capable of carrying nuclear warheads, missile sites outside Zirnitra's borders are unnecessary.' Last Tuesday, however, I received intelligence regarding these suspected missile sites and directed the military to step up surveillance."*

That indicated that the government had been aware of the sites as early as a week ago. In other words, this crisis—not a cold—was the real reason the prime minister hadn't attended the Expo.

"Surveillance made it clear that the UZSR had lied and that they've decided to station strategic weapons outside Zirnitra for the first time. Arnack can't accept that deliberate provocation." The prime minister's voice rose. *"The world sits on the brink of nuclear war. We lack the means to defend ourselves in the event of an attack; cities would be destroyed in minutes. To halt the UZSR's aggressive preparation for offensive military maneuvers..."*

He took a deep breath.

"Arnack is initiating a naval blockade."

That announcement sent a buzz of hushed conversation through the crowd at the bar. Any vessels that attempted to pass a naval blockade would be detained. It was an extremely hard line to take—

essentially, a declaration of war against the blockaded country.

“We demand that the UZSR dismantle its missile sites!” The prime minister took a moment to let his anger settle, then continued to explain Arnack’s intended response. His calm tone showed that his goal was to allay viewers’ fear and confusion. He sent a sympathetic message to the “captive people of Imprisoned Island,” criticizing Zirnitra for making them puppets in an international conspiracy.

The prime minister then shared his hopes that Imprisoned Island might once again know freedom. *“Nobody can see precisely what course lies ahead—whether this issue will resolve peacefully or end tragically. The path we’re choosing for the present is hazardous, as all paths would’ve been. However, we’ll prove Arnack’s character and courage. We wish for peace and freedom here in this hemisphere, and hopefully worldwide.”*

He ended with a prayer, and just like that, the prime minister’s seventeen-minute emergency broadcast finished.

It was a crisis unlike anything people had ever known. Panic and unrest engulfed the hotel. Bart’s palms sweated; the wine seemed to have vanished entirely from his system. He’d felt unreal terror during the prime minister’s broadcast as he realized the world was on a precipice, and nuclear war might break out at any moment.

“Kaye...”

Kaye hadn’t budged since they started watching the broadcast. Bart’s voice broke the spell on her, and she turned toward him. She was pale, shocked, and speechless; fear filled her eyes. *What should we do?* they asked. *What’s going to happen?*

Bart didn’t have an answer. All he had were questions. *What do we do right here and now? Find a shelter? Run? Where to?*

He looked around. Everyone was lost in their own panic. Even Jennifer, the embodiment of poise, seemed astonished. The chatter of politicians and reporters filled Bart’s ears.

“If the prime minister goes through with that blockade, we’ll need to worry about aerial bombing next!”

“If we don’t take them out now, aren’t we just waiting for them to retaliate?”

“A blockade won’t do the trick. We need to strike first. We have to consider land and air strategies...”

Ominous, frightened claims flew back and forth across the lobby.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” came a sudden, sharp cry.

Several Arnackian bureaucrats had cornered the Zirnitran tour group. The Delivery Crew agent looked confused. Lev clenched his fists as he fought to hold back his rage. Irina frowned, apparently at a complete loss. Their expressions said it all: The news surprised them as much as everyone else.

Sundancia clung to her royal secretary. “You knew about the missiles, didn’t you? Why didn’t you tell me?” She was on the verge of tears. It would be hard for some people to believe, but although she was the nation’s monarch, she’d been told nothing.

“No! This is the first I’ve heard of them,” replied the royal secretary. “When the prime minister touched base, he just said he didn’t want to worry us until he’d made a decision.”

“What should I do?” asked Sundancia.

Faced with her worry, the royal secretary was resolute. “Sign the declaration of the naval blockade.”

“We’re really going through with that?” The queen’s voice trembled.

“That decision came through EXCOMM—the National Security Council’s executive committee. We already have our allied nations’ approval.”

“This is the first I’ve ever heard of ‘EXCOMM,’” said Sundancia.

Her secretary explained that the group contained about ten members specifically chosen to respond to crises. It included representatives of the regular security council, such as the secretaries of state and of defense, alongside the head of intelligence and other specialists. “You must trust our nation’s Brightest, Your Majesty.”

“But what’s the situation in full?”

“UK forces stationed around the world are now at DEFCON 3. The situation’s beyond our control. All we can do now is watch it unfold.”

Sundancia’s face was white as she was led away, stumbling.

Time trickled by. Kaye didn’t say a word; she merely sat in a chair, lifeless. Bart sat beside her, unable to find words to spark hope. They stayed like that for maybe ten minutes.

Then there was movement. An Expo organizer appeared alongside an elderly, high-ranking government official, and they began gathering conference attendees. A crowd grew at once, their faces heavy with concern. Bart and Kaye stayed where they were, listening from a distance.

The Expo organizer dabbed his sweaty forehead meekly with a handkerchief. "Tomorrow's conference will go ahead as scheduled," he rasped.

Caught off guard, ANSA employees pushed forward.

"Is this *really* the time for a conference?!" one cried.

"Let him finish, please!"

"I demand a complete explanation!"

A bellow suddenly cut in, silencing the uproar. "Calm down! All of you!" It was the official. Once he was sure he had everyone's attention, he continued. "The whole world's watching this Expo. Canceling the conference would just invite baseless speculation, so EXCOMM's told us to continue as planned!"

"Still, you—"

"For now, all we know is that these missile sites exist! Nuclear war won't break out tomorrow. Even if it did, we're outside striking range!"

"The problem isn't striking range!"

The crowd erupted into protests, and the bar's elegant atmosphere crumbled as everyone hurled words of anger and uncertainty. Bart and Kaye just watched from their chairs.

Jennifer walked over, exhaustion clear in her eyes. "Go back to your rooms for now."

"Are we really attending the conference tomorrow?" Bart asked.

"For the time being, assume the answer's yes." She sighed, her hands on her hips. "If I'm told about any changes to your schedule, you'll hear from me. But I pray you won't." Her usual snide confidence was gone.

Bart tapped Kaye's shoulder. "Let's go. There's nothing we can do here anyway."

"Okay."

The pair weaved through the crowd, their leaden legs trudging toward their accommodations. Bart walked Kaye to her hotel room, then headed to his. He turned on the television, stripped off his suffocatingly tight suit, and threw himself onto his bed in his underwear. The news was replaying the prime minister's announcement; there were no updates.

Bart heaved a deep, heavy sigh. "Missiles..." he muttered.

He'd planned to do a final check of the conference agenda, but that no longer seemed important. He wondered whether Kaye would be all right alone in her room. She hadn't said a single word after they left the bar; she hadn't even replied when he bid her good night. Suddenly worried, he put an ear to the wall between their rooms, but he heard nothing.

The TV newscaster was explaining how to evacuate in an emergency. "*Head belowground or take shelter in a strong, sturdy building. Don't look at the light.*"

Still feeling suffocated, Bart walked to the window and opened the glossy blue velvet curtains. Droplets of rain dotted the glass. It must've started drizzling after they returned to the hotel. Cracking the window, Bart was met by the scent of damp air, and he took a deep breath to calm his racing heart.

He wanted someone to talk to. He thought about going to Kaye, certain she'd be shaky and lonely. *What would I even say, though? Nothing could make her feel any better.*

Bart grasped the window frame, and the cool night air brushed against his skin. Then he heard a sound so gentle, he almost missed it entirely. It was a knock on the door.

Kaye?

Knowing instinctively that it was her, Bart pulled on his pajamas and headed for the door. He opened it to find Kaye, exactly as he'd expected. She'd also changed into her pajamas, and there was a haggard look in her eyes.

"May I stay with you?" she asked, her voice tiny. "Just for a little while?"

"O-of course," said Bart. "I was hoping to talk to you anyway."

His reply seemed to reassure her. He let her in and escorted her to

the sofa, then sat across from her on the edge of the bed.

“Can I get you a coffee?” he asked.

“No thanks.”

On the sofa next to Kaye sat a copy of Lev and Irina’s book, *The Journey to Space*. Kaye picked it up. Inside was a colorful photograph of the two cosmonauts standing proudly in their space suits, their helmets in their arms.

“They didn’t know anything about the missile sites, did they?” There was a hint of anger in Kaye’s voice.

Bart felt so sorry for Lev and Irina. He knew they would never have wanted the sites established. “While they crossed Arnack on their first visit, the Union was secretly transporting missiles and building those facilities. It’s almost like they used the cosmonauts as decoys to distract us.”

It wouldn’t be the first time, since the UZSR had done something similar the previous summer. While cosmonaut Mikhail Yashin’s orbital flight fascinated the world, the Union had been preparing to surround a city in a satellite nation with barbed wire fences.

Perhaps they’d even staged Roza Plevitskaya’s “rendezvous” a month earlier for a similar purpose. The timing seemed too perfect for it to be a coincidence. It disgusted Bart that Zirnitra would use its own cosmonauts in such a manner.

He changed the channel a few times, searching for updates, but they all showed the same thing. It was only when Bart found a live broadcast of cities across Arnack that something caught his eye. “Kaye, look!”

Kaye lifted her head. Her eyes widened. “That’s...”

It was Laika Crescent. People flooded the supermarkets. Families huddled in nuclear bunkers. Drivers stuck in traffic honked their horns in frustration. The lively city of jazz was now cacophonous with fear and confusion. The channel didn’t air footage of the Moonlight District, but it was no doubt experiencing similar panic.

“*Laika Crescent contains an air force base and an aerospace research center, so the likelihood of a nuclear strike is extremely high,*” a military expert explained.

“Everyone must be so worried,” Kaye said, her voice quivering.

She was on the verge of tears. “Dad... Oh, I want to go home!”

Laika Crescent was Kaye’s hometown, and Bart could see how overwhelmed she felt, but he didn’t know what to say. How could he find an upside to all this? Anything he told Kaye would seem hollow and empty.

The news went on stoking the fires of panic. In dramatic detail, the military expert outlined the retaliatory airstrikes the UK might soon face.

“I’ve had enough,” Bart muttered, muting the TV. He wanted to turn it off completely, but he was worried another emergency broadcast might air.

Wind blew through the open window, and the curtains danced. Kaye heaved a deep sigh. Her face looked empty. She lifted herself from the sofa and walked to the window, touched the frame, and gazed outside.

Bart watched her. Kaye was so tiny, he felt as though she might vanish into the darkness. He knew he couldn’t leave her alone. He stood and walked to her side, and they peered at the scenery together.

Street lamps and taillights blurred in the drizzling rain. The Space Tower—the symbol of the future—was dark, its silhouette seeming to watch over the city.

Kaye took it all in as the wind swept through her hair. “If a nuclear war starts, what will happen to the world?”

It was an earnest question, and it went through Bart’s heart like a spear.

She closed her eyes. “The vivid sunsets. The night skies glittering with stars. The queen of the night flowers and the fireflies in the forest. The punch card mountains D Room made. The supermarket where I buy takeout. All of it, everything...could disappear instantly.”

Closing his own eyes, Bart pictured Laika Crescent destroyed by a nuclear missile. The houses, the towns, the Manned Spacecraft Center, the Rocket Launch Center. The roads the D Room team walked during their march on the date of the orbital flight. The grassy clearing where he and Kaye launched compact satellites with dhampir children. The marsh where they’d looked for UFOs. The duck that stole Kaye’s cookie.

Those would all be gone.

“Bart...” Kaye’s voice was pained. “They’d use all the rockets as missiles. The computers would be military tools. There’d be no place for spaceflight or a lunar landing in that world, would there?” She fell to her knees and hugged herself, shaking. “Holding the conference is supposed to reassure everyone, but what’s the point?!”

Bart wanted to say something, anything, to encourage her. Kaye’s smile had saved him countless times. Now he wanted to support her. He knelt by her side and took her trembling hands.

“No matter what happens,” he told her, “I’m here with you.”

Tears welled in Kaye’s eyes. She looked up at him. “Bart...”

“I’m here with you,” he said again. “That’s why...”

Why I can’t tell you it’s all going to be okay.

Why I can’t tell you not to worry.

Why—

“Why we’re carrying our dreams into tomorrow,” he told her, his words taking on a note of decisiveness. “We can’t solve a national crisis on our own, and we don’t have the power to stop a war. There’s one thing only you and I can do.”

“What’s that?”

Bart squeezed Kaye’s hands. “We can use our expertise to create the Blue Angel so the dreams of anyone hoping for that moment come true. We can bring everybody with us to the twenty-first century.”

Kaye said nothing. As she held Bart’s hands tightly, he felt the strength in her slender fingers and sensed a deep emotion she couldn’t articulate.

“Frankly, I’m scared,” Bart continued. “I don’t know when this crisis will end. Maybe it never will. It might even wind up being a catastrophe. But, Kaye, we have to believe the day will come when we travel all the way to the end of the galaxy. We need to hold on to our dreams. Carry them into tomorrow, and the day after, forever.”

Kaye nodded. “Forever...”

A breeze blew through the window, cooling them.

“Maybe people around the world will call us idiots for focusing on space travel under these circumstances. They might say that making all this effort just to visit some rock floating in space is pointless. And hey,

maybe it is—but we can’t just give up hope.” Bart stared at the thick rainclouds covering the night sky. “We can’t see the moon now. As long as it’s up there, though, let’s keep trying to make our dreams come true.”

“You’re right.” Kaye wiped tears from her eyes and smiled. “We have to conquer that detestable moon!”

Her smile warmed Bart’s heart. “I’ve gotta admit, I can’t really get on board with this whole ‘hating the moon’ thing,” he joked.

Kaye’s cheeks puffed into a playful pout. “Well, just go right ahead and like it as much as you want, then!”

Bart laughed. “At least we’re on the same page about getting there, right?”

The television had switched to a weather broadcast. The weatherman expected the rain to continue through tomorrow.

“I wish all this would just go away when morning comes. Who knows what’s ahead?” Kaye said. As she spoke again, something in her hesitated. “Hey. What you said just now about being with me, whatever happens...”

Hearing Kaye repeat his words embarrassed Bart. He blushed. “Uh, yeah?”

“I...I feel the same.”

“Huh?”

As her feelings welled up and overflowed, she babbled on. “About being together, and not just at work. I want to tour the Expo together, and go UFO spotting, and make our own satellites. I-I want to discuss space over dinner...”

Bart felt overwhelmed. It took everything he had just to mumble, “Okay.”

“I-I’m sorry.” Kaye’s face abruptly grew nervous. “I guess that’s not what you meant.” She wrapped herself in the window drapes to hide.

He was now speaking to a shape in the curtains. “No, it’s—”

“Sorry I bugged you so late at night. I’ll head back to my room.” Kaye’s hand poked from the curtains and waved. “Bye!”

She unwrapped herself and began speed-walking to the door, not

meeting his eyes. Bart's mind raced. *Can I just let her go? Shouldn't I be honest?* Before he realized it, he'd grabbed Kaye's wrist.

"Wait! I feel the same way." He knelt before her, her hand in his, hoping to convey his thoughts. She looked down at him, her eyes uncertain. "Back in Laika Crescent, we'll do everything you said. And we'll return to the Expo, just the two of us. I promise," he said, holding out his pinky finger.

"Oh! We're pinky swearing." Kaye smiled and knelt, extending her own finger.

Bart shook his head. "No."

"Huh?"

"I want to make this promise the dhampir way."

"Dhampir way? You mean..." Kaye's eyes widened. "A pinky blood oath?"

"Yes."

"B-but that's..."

"I want to understand you, Kaye. More than I do now."

"Do you really mean that?"

Bart nodded. "After I tried to pinky swear with you before, I realized something. I'd assumed I was getting to know you—that I understood you. But I was wrong. We walked through the Expo together today, but maybe we saw different futures. After all, humans organized the Expo, so it's designed from our perspective."

Kaye looked perplexed. "I had no idea."

"You and I can close that gap. We can understand each other."

"I've been thinking the same thing," Kaye admitted. "I even read a human novel to learn more about you. But..." she trailed off, staring at Bart's pinky.

"We don't have to make a blood oath if you don't want to." He had no intention of forcing her to do something she was uncomfortable with.

"No, it's not that. It's just... You realize it means tasting my blood, right?"

"Yeah. But it's just from a shallow cut, isn't it? I'm fine with that."

To a human, the pinky blood oath might seem inappropriate, even heretical. But Bart just wanted to make a true vow to Kaye. Was there something wrong with tasting a trickle of her blood? It didn't break any laws.

"What worries me is that I don't have fangs. I don't know how to draw blood from your pinky."

"I'll pierce it with mine." Kaye looked down at the floor nervously. "That is, if it isn't too creepy."

Not wanting Kaye to fret, Bart told her honestly, "I've never once thought you were creepy."

Kaye gaped at him in surprise and saw the seriousness in his gaze. Her red eyes darted around, but she gripped her little finger. "If a blood oath is what you want..."

"It is. Thank you." Bart didn't know how the process worked, though. "So...who starts?"

"I'll drink your blood first. Hold out your left hand."

"Okay." Bart touched his left pinky, wondering whether he should sterilize his flesh, the way he would've for a needle or something. "Should I wash my hands first?"

"If you like. I suppose I'll wash up."

"All right. Maybe I will too."

"Should we do that, then?"

They were both lost in uncertainty.

"We'll bleed too, right? After you bite us?" Bart added. "We probably shouldn't get this expensive carpet dirty."

"Right. How should we handle that?"

"Let's make the blood oath in the bathroom. That way, we can clean the blood up pretty easily."

"True," Kaye said, nodding.

The hotel room's marble bathroom was at least five times larger than Bart's. He and Kaye took off the outer layer of their pajamas. Then, wearing only simple short-sleeved shirts, they washed their hands.

"I'm kind of nervous," Bart said.

Kaye pointed at the toothbrush by the sink. "Should I brush my

teeth, since I'm biting you?"

"I don't think you need to go *that* far."

"N-no? I think I'll brush them quickly anyway."

They stood side by side, brushing their teeth as if doing a ritual cleansing before their blood oath. Then they sat on the edge of the bathtub together.

Bart held out his left pinky. "I'm ready."

"Okay." With a deep breath, Kaye took Bart's hand in both of hers. "Here goes."

She brought his hand closer to her face, and he felt her soft lips as they touched his pinky. Then Kaye opened her mouth. Her fangs flashed, and her warm breath tickled Bart's fingers.

"Promise me we'll make our dreams come true," she said into his skin.

"I promise."

Bart felt his heart beat in his chest as Kaye quietly nipped his little finger.



The skin split as her fangs pierced it, and dull pain ran from Bart's finger up his arm into his neck. His mind went blank, and a chill crawled down his spine. Warmth burned at the core of his being. As Kaye gently licked the wound, it stung with sweet pain unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

Kaye kissed his fingertip one last time, then pulled away. The red of her eyes deepened, and a pink flush appeared on her cheeks. Bart looked at his finger, feeling as though he'd been suddenly released from a spell. Blood welled from the puncture wound.

"Are you all right?!" Kaye asked quickly.

"Yeah. It doesn't hurt that much."

He'd actually wanted her to keep going, but he couldn't say that aloud, given Kaye's worried expression. Feeling guilty, he tucked the desire away in the depths of his heart.

Once Bart had washed the blood and saliva from his finger, all that remained was a tiny wound. It looked like a sharp branch had poked him.

"How was it, Kaye?"

"It tasted the same as my blood."

"Oh. Okay."

"Your turn."

"Right." Bart looked at Kaye's finger and gulped.

Kaye patted her cheeks lightly a few times, calming her nerves, then took a deep breath. "I'll get ready for the oath, then."

"Sure," Bart said.

Kaye placed her pinky in her mouth and bit it, then held out her delicate white hand, her finger red with blood.

"So I, uh...I just do the same thing as you, right?"

"Right."

"Here goes." Bart drew a deep breath and took Kaye's hand in his. "Promise me we'll make our dreams come true."

"I promise."

He looked Kaye in the eyes and swallowed again. His heart

pounded so hard, he thought blood might gush from his pinky. Then he brought Kaye's finger to his lips and put it in his mouth, licking it. Kaye's finger twitched, and his mouth filled with the flavor of her blood, which—like his own—had the salty taste of iron.

At that moment, Bart thought he felt Kaye's essence. It was different from the warmth of her hand or the sensation of her body when he'd fallen on her. He felt like he was inside her, and like breaking his promise would rack her whole body with pain. It was the strangest sensation.

Then, as Kaye had, Bart kissed her fingertip and released her hand. "Was that...right?" he asked.

Kaye nodded, slouching. Her face was red. "This promise was ours and ours alone."

Ours. The word echoed into the deepest parts of his heart. He remembered how the blood oath had once symbolized marriage. What he'd sworn here alongside Kaye was different, of course, but it seemed special nonetheless.

"I won't tell a soul," he agreed. "This was a pledge between the two of us."

They just had to be careful to conceal it from Jennifer, who seemingly had a sixth sense for things like this. After washing her hands, Kaye pressed toilet paper over her pinky to stop the bleeding, then flushed it away. The tension that had filled the air lifted all at once, and Bart felt suddenly lighter.

As he relaxed, though, Kaye's face grew somber. "Do you think there might be updates on the missile sites, Bart?"

"Maybe." He wished they could just forget those, but it was impossible.

Leaving the bathroom pulled them from their pocket-sized universe, shunting them back into reality. They checked the television, but there were no updates. Or perhaps, more accurately, there were none for ordinary citizens. The UK was preparing a naval blockade, so things *had* to be moving behind the scenes. The UZSR would expect that and was sure to be making its own preparations.

"I wonder if there'll be much of a discussion at the conference tomorrow, under the circumstances," Bart said.

Kaye nodded, equally anxious. “Instead of discussing space development, we may find ourselves arguing about shifting national funds toward military expenses.”

“Even if we avoid nuclear war, we might lose our chance to visit the moon.”

Of the many projects ANSA was developing, the lunar landing had the fewest defensive benefits. After the prime minister’s statement, landing spacecraft on the moon would seem much less practical than launching military satellites to observe Earth. If the crisis worsened, the government would almost certainly slash Project Hyperion’s budget first. As far as top politicians were concerned, the race to the moon didn’t impact much more than the stubborn pride of two competing superpowers anyway.

So, what can we do? What should we do? We can’t just sit twiddling our thumbs for the entire conference. ANSA officials and politicians with budgetary sway are attending. Kaye and I will never have a chance like this again! On the other hand, we were asked to speak as computer engineers. What then? Should we bend over backward telling big names what they want to hear? No! We’ve got to create the road to the future ourselves.

“I’ve made up my mind, Kaye,” Bart said.

“Sorry?”

“We’ll propose a lunar orbit rendezvous tomorrow.”

Kaye’s eyes bulged. “We don’t have nearly enough data to convince anyone!”

“But right now, the space program’s looking at a massive budget cut. If we want to reach the moon, the method needs to be cost effective and simple.”

“Yes, but...” Kaye trailed off, still hesitant.

Bart figured she was taken aback, given that he’d revealed his idea so suddenly. Even so, he was sure she’d understand. “If the world were ending tomorrow, would you hold back on this proposal?”

Kaye’s breath caught in her throat.

Bart pointed his pinky toward her; it was still a bit bloody. “We just promised to make our dreams come true.”

Kaye’s expression hardened, making her look confident and

resolute. “You’re right. And only we can make it happen.” She wrapped her pinky around Bart’s, then pointed their fingers toward the Space Tower’s silhouette, nearly hidden amid the night sky. “The lunar landing is our dream—and the dream of people worldwide. We’ll use science, and a future in space, to give them hope.”

The television began to play the nation’s most popular love song, and Kaye invoked D Room’s magical slogan. “We’ll fly them to the moon!”

That was where they were headed, and they’d take everyone along.

Bart and Kaye worked through the night on documents endorsing the lunar orbit rendezvous method. Given the timeframe and circumstances, putting together a proposal they had faith in was a tall order.

Kaye could rely on the data and calculations she’d memorized, but without tools, she couldn’t draw precise diagrams. That was where Bart came in, using cup bottoms as curves and binder edges as rulers as he drew skillful graphs.

“Hold that for a sec, Kaye.”

She pressed the cup down. “This way?”

“I can’t draw the orbit if you hold it like that. Your hand’s in the way.”

“Oh! Sorry. I didn’t even notice.”

It was a slog, but together, they finished a few slides to project during their talk. They were confident about the lunar orbit rendezvous method, but they had to hope the conferencegoers wouldn’t laugh them offstage before they finished speaking on the topic.

Sipping a cup of bitter coffee to stave off sleep, Bart found himself thinking of the past. “The last time we pulled an all-nighter was the night of the blood moon.”

There had been a fierce hurricane that evening, but he and Kaye worked on calculations through the night to ensure that Arnack’s first orbital spaceflight succeeded.

“That was the night you learned I had Nosferatu Syndrome,” Kaye said nostalgically. She smiled. “It was only eight months ago, but it seems like so much longer.”

“I feel like we’ve worked together for years.”

“So do I. Maybe it’s all the joint PR work.”

“If we convinced Division Chief Damon last time, we can convince the conference this time!” Bart said, trying to spur himself on, but he couldn’t help feeling exhausted. He’d barely slept the previous night, and the Expo and formal dinner had really drained him. He let out a big yawn.

Kaye shot him a mischievous glance. “If you’re sleepy, I’ve got wasabi.”

“I’m not *that* sleepy.” Bart cracked the window to wake himself up.

Misty rain continued to fall, and black clouds blocked the moonlight. Bart felt as if a blanket of darkness hung over the twenty-first century, but he and Kaye were going to brighten it with a hopeful light.

Star Eyes

THE NATIONAL DEFENSE MEETING on the missile crisis had gone off the rails. Arnack was now aware that Zirnitra had transported missiles to Imprisoned Island, but however long the “Brightest” think tank put their heads together, they couldn’t choose a suitable response.

“What on earth is Gergiev thinking?!” snapped the prime minister.

Thirty of the missile sites were capable of launching a strike. After learning of those sites, Arnack’s government had immediately contacted the Zirnitran embassy, only to find that the ambassador—who’d rushed to his official residence—had received no information from his homeland.

The situation was confusing, updates were slow, and it was impossible to know what the UZSR hoped to accomplish. Time was of the essence, yet correspondence with Zirnitran leaders required the use of ciphers and post. Even in a time of non-emergency, touching base took up to six hours. To make matters worse, Arnack had just gotten word that their mole in the UZSR had been captured, which would

make the Union seem even more unpredictable.

The air force's chief of staff, an aggressive man nicknamed "Kill 'Em All" and "Bombs Away" advocated for a first strike. "We can't avoid nuclear war any longer, so we should strike first. A blockade? Our allies will think we're gutless! Our citizens will think so too."

However, the prime minister refused to entertain the idea. "Striking first will just bring on a nuclear counterattack! Are you prepared for Andrei to wreak radioactive havoc around the globe?!"

Kill 'Em All outlined a plan that would cause the deaths of half the Union's citizens. "If we're afraid of retaliation, let's hit them hard enough to make it impossible. Bomb their key cities before they have a chance to hit us!"

"Are you out of your damn mind?! I'm not considering any plan that involves a preemptive strike! I won't have a hand in selfishly destroying the entire world!"

Eventually, the government signed off on a potential counterattack. They readied a squad to fire medium-range ballistic missiles at a moment's notice and sent nuclear submarines to the naval blockade line.

"We don't know what the UZSR wants," said the prime minister. "But we'll pray, hope, and above all *strive* for peace. We'll have faith that cooler heads will prevail."

They sent secret transmissions to Gergiev in search of a compromise. Those transmissions were Arnack's last hope. The world's future hinged on rockets—where they were aimed and what they carried. Would they take people to the moon or drop monstrosities on the Earth?

Chapter 5: The Way to the Future

Blue Eyes

THE NEXT DAY, the global crisis was even worse. News outlets worldwide were panicking. Television broadcasts showed a Zirnitran fleet believed to be carrying warheads to Imprisoned Island. Among the vessels were the very ships named after the Union's cosmonauts—the *Lev Leps* and the *Irina Luminesk*.

Responding to the prime minister's speech, the Zirnitran government made their own statement through the National Broadcasting Service: "*The United Kingdom's naval blockade is an act of piracy and provocation that breaches international law. We therefore reject their demands. We will neither withdraw our twenty-five ships nor remove any weapons. Our nuclear-warhead-equipped ballistic missiles are at the ready.*"

The UZSR's military and allies were on the alert, and a clash seemed imminent. Fear overwhelmed Arnack—nuclear shelters overflowed, supermarkets ran out of stock, and huge peace protests took place in the nation's capital. In Marine City, too, protest groups gathered in the rain, crying out for nuclear weapons testing to stop as they marched toward the Expo grounds.

Despite the panic the crisis was causing, the 21st Century Expo continued as planned. The visitor count plummeted, however. The general atmosphere was unlike any in history. Just before the Expo opened, an antiwar group even attempted to climb the Space Tower.

In the midst of this tension, the conference was about to start. There had been some concern that the event would be largely empty, but a line snaked out from the opera house hosting the conference. By the time it was set to start, the seats were packed.

The conferencegoers included reporters hoping for slivers of new information about Imprisoned Island. That wasn't too surprising. After all, besides the scientific luminaries attending the conference, two Zirnitran cosmonauts and the queen herself would be present. The

speakers would likely disappoint the journalists, given that the National Security Council had formally requested that they not comment on the crisis.

In the opera house's spacious green room, speakers waited for the first session to begin. The Zirnitran party hadn't shown up yet. Bart and Kaye had been preparing all night, not sleeping a wink. They weren't the only ones: Practically everyone in the green room looked haggard and exhausted, from the engineering professor fearfully reading his newspaper to the portly state governor gulping a cup of coffee.

Also present was an elderly man with an awkward expression—the government scientific advisor who'd once declared that astronauts engaging in a lunar orbit rendezvous would have a one percent chance of safe return.

There were also astronautical experts from Arnack's top three aircraft manufacturers. Their companies had landed rocket and spacecraft development contracts, but exactly how much work each would receive depended on the landing method ANSA chose, making today's conference particularly vital to them. One company's vice-president left the green room repeatedly to make calls, panicking over the crisis. His company specialized not in space development but in military vehicle and missile production. If war broke out, their space division would be dissolved immediately.

Both Professor Vil Klaus and Director Oliver Kissing were representing ANSA at the conference. Kissing always wore a scowl, but his expression today was especially bitter. He had to get through a debate with his rival *and* focus on a nuclear crisis. It was only natural that he was tense.

Bart shook Klaus's hand and introduced himself. The professor was about his father's age. Klaus's hair was going white, and while he exuded graceful calm, he also had an intimidating aura not unlike a politician's.

Whereas Kissing was cold, Klaus was warm. Bart had looked up to the professor since childhood, and Klaus had inspired his dreams. He couldn't express his true feelings with Kissing standing right within earshot, though. Instead, he and Klaus merely exchanged greetings. Bart wished they could speak under less dire, more relaxed circumstances.

When Klaus met Kaye, he looked her in the eye and shook her hand. "I think very highly of your research papers and technical report."

"Thank you so much. I'm honored," Kaye replied.

"By the way, where does an expert like yourself stand on the lunar landing method? Do you favor direct ascent or an Earth orbit rendezvous?"

The question took Kaye by surprise. "Erm, well..."

Before she could scrounge up an answer, Kissing loudly cleared his throat.

Klaus smiled confidently, nodding. "Excuse me. We'll have time to talk later."

The professor left, and Kissing glared at Arnack One. "Bart. Kaye. I know direct ascent isn't perfect, but Klaus's Earth orbit rendezvous is no better."

"Right you are, sir," they replied.

Kissing nodded, satisfied. "When he invites up those aircraft manufacturers, you computer engineers poke holes in their arguments."

"Understood, sir," said Kaye.

Kissing turned to engage with a different speaker, and Bart and Kaye looked at each other, brows furrowed. As they'd expected, ANSA's two key players refused to see eye to eye. Their debate was bound to end at an impasse. Still, they couldn't tell either man their plan to suggest a lunar orbit rendezvous. They didn't want to risk being shut down before taking the stage.

A sudden commotion rose near the green room entrance. The Zirnitran tour party had arrived, wearing grim expressions. Lev and Irina somberly dipped their heads to the gathered speakers. They looked despondent and truly sorry about the circumstances.

"What's the situation?" a UK government employee asked.

"We've contacted the Zirnitran embassy, but we haven't heard back," the Delivery Crew agent said, looking as stern as ever.

The missile crisis had forced one big change to the conference agenda: The organizers scrapped the "Collaborative Astronautics" session entirely. Given the state of the world, any talk of cooperation would've been hollow. Thus, there would only be two discussions: "Manned Spaceflight and the Lunar Landing" and the question period concluding the event. The chief of the Expo's organizing committee had

advised Lev and Irina against attending the question period, but both cosmonauts had insisted.

“If we are criticized, we will accept it,” Lev had said on their behalf.

He once again gestured in apology, then spoke briefly to everyone gathered. “I am truly unhappy that these missile sites exist and that a ship with my own name has been loaded with nuclear warheads.”

“We know our presence might make you uneasy, but please permit us to attend the question period,” Irina said. “Should the crowd make a fuss, we will leave immediately.”

In truth, none of the speakers considered either Lev or Irina responsible for Zirnitra’s actions, so no one was willing to deny the cosmonauts. The speakers pitied them, if anything. After discussing how to proceed with the day’s sessions, everyone agreed that Lev and Irina could address the audience for a few moments when the question period began. They felt the crowd would appreciate it.

Bart reached out to Lev. “Thank you for being part of this.”

“I should thank you.” Lev shook Bart’s hand, his smile forced. “Irina and I cannot discuss our space program in depth, but we wish to fulfill our responsibilities to the Expo.” Bart could tell Lev had made up his mind.

Kaye approached Irina—who seemed smaller under all the pressure—and wrapped her gently in an encouraging hug. The dhampir woman said nothing as she patted the young vampire’s back, but Irina’s expression seemed to relax, if only a little. There was no telling exactly how she felt, surrounded by humans as the UK and UZSR faced off. Kaye’s presence must’ve reassured her.

Queen Sundancia arrived, a little late, with the royal secretary in tow. Her face was racked with exhaustion, and her eyes were puffy, perhaps from tears. She’d apparently suffered a sleepless night as well, but she faced the gathered speakers with a smile. “Thank you all for coming today.”

The queen put up a veneer of strength, but for a moment, she seemed fragile to Bart—as though she might suddenly shatter.

Sundancia was scheduled to deliver the conference’s closing speech; she would also observe the question period. She’d remain in the

green room until then, resting and listening to the discussions. As Bart watched her sit down with a distant gaze, he couldn't help but fret. He wished he could say something to her, but he doubted he'd be able to with everyone around.

The first conference session would start in five minutes. Bart's hand held his presentation papers tightly, including the documents on lunar orbit rendezvous he and Kaye had prepared the previous night. They walked toward the edge of the stage. The time was at hand.

But now, flanked by Professor Klaus and the other speakers, Bart felt his confidence wane. "We're going through with it, right?" he whispered to Kaye.

"Yes," she replied, albeit a little hesitantly. Evidently, she was feeling the pressure too.

As they murmured, Jennifer grabbed their shoulders. "Secret talks again? You two planning a hot date?"

"N-nothing of the sort," Bart said.

Jennifer peered closely at them. "What *were* you two doing holed up in Bart's room last night?"

She knew! Bart hid the scar on his pinky. "Final preparations for today! Right, Kaye?"

"Right! That's right. We discussed the lunar landing for ages!"

"Well, you two can do whatever you like. I won't meddle in your free time... Will I, my little saint?" Jennifer asked Kaye, twisting the knife.

"Why start taking potshots now?!" Kaye snapped.

When Jennifer laughed, Bart realized she was just trying to break the tension. "So it *was* a date, huh?"

Well, it was certainly something, Bart reflected. Although Jennifer was managing them, he couldn't tell her about their planned proposal. He had a hunch it would only cause her more trouble.

Before he had a chance to think further, Jennifer pinched both his ears. "Ouch!" he cried.

"Listen, you can mull over this crisis all you want, but you can't affect it. You're just a PR guy. Focus on the conference, mmkay?"

Bart nodded vigorously, relieved that she'd misinterpreted his

worried expression. “Got it.”

Releasing his ears, Jennifer glanced at Kaye. “You look tense, Saint Kaye.”

Gasp ing, Kaye covered her ears with both hands. Doing so left her sides open, however, and Jennifer quickly swooped in to tickle her ribs.

“Eep! Stop it! Hee hee!”

While Kaye yelped, Jennifer’s attack continued. When she finally let up, Kaye was exhausted. Realizing that all the hubbub had drawn quizzical stares from other speakers, the young dhampir shrank down with a sheepish expression.

“There you go.” Jennifer crossed her arms tightly across her chest. “You don’t get opportunities to speak onstage with people like this too often. Enjoy the moment! I can tell you *I’m* looking forward to it. Looking forward to how much you two stick out, anyway.”

“Stick out?” Bart said.

“I’ve got to tell you, when you held that protest march, I hadn’t even realized it was an option. Talk about shocking! Sure, my boss fumed, but that guy’s brain froze before the war.” Jennifer shrugged knowingly, then lowered her voice. “These speakers are too old to discuss the twenty-first century. This conference needs a shot of youthful exuberance, don’t you think?”

Bart wondered if Jennifer realized that they had something planned. If so, her powers of intuition were truly terrifying. At any rate, if she was granting them implicit permission, he was going to take it.

“We’ll give them that shot,” Kaye said, and that was that.

“We’ll make sure they get their tax money’s worth,” Bart agreed.

Jennifer snorted. “Yeah, yeah. Just get out there and do your thing.”

The time had come. Bart whispered in Kaye’s ear as they stepped closer. “I’ll keep an eye on things and signal you when we should bring up the lunar orbit rendezvous.”

“What’s the signal?”

“I’ll take my glasses off and clean them.”

About to reveal their handwritten proposal to the gathered speakers, Bart and Kaye stood on a precipice of their own. They had no

plan of attack; they'd just hit everyone with their idea head-on. Caressing the scab on his pinky, Bart swore to himself that they'd succeed.

With a full house, the conference began.

The emcee, an ANSA scientist, walked to center stage to greet the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us today at the Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space."

The words "peaceful uses" had a hollow ring. At first, the crowd listened silently, but boos and sighs filled the hall when the emcee announced that the "Collaborative Astronautics" session was canceled. Clearly, many conferencegoers had come just for the cosmonauts.

"Please, everyone, calm down!" the emcee shouted, flustered. He hurriedly informed the crowd that Lev and Irina would attend the question period and deliver short speeches. That soothed the audience, and the booing stopped.

Bart waited in the wings, wondering nervously whether the cosmonauts would really make it through the question period without trouble. Unfortunately, he had to worry about how *his* proposal went first.

"Without further ado," the emcee said, "give a warm welcome to the speakers on 'Manned Spaceflight and the Lunar Landing'!"

Each speaker walked onstage as the emcee called their name—the government's scientific advisor, the state governor, a university lecturer, and space engineers for aircraft manufacturers and enterprise directors. One by one, the speakers said a few words praising the Expo and shared their gratitude at being part of the conference. Nobody mentioned the crisis, and even Kissing only said a short thank-you. The crowd applauded.

Bart was next up. He took a deep breath, clutching his papers a bit tighter.

"From the Manned Spacecraft Center's Digital Computing Room, Supervisor Bart Fifield!"

On cue, Bart walked to center stage. “It’s an honor to speak to you all at such an incredible Expo.”

The crowd was almost entirely human, although there were a few dhampirs. Overall, the crowd looked tense and serious—not at all like they’d come to enjoy the affair.

“From the Manned Spacecraft Center’s Digital Computing Room, Manager Kaye Scarlet!”

Kaye walked onstage and gave a dignified bow. Like the others, she said a few words. Meanwhile, Bart sat in the semicircle of chairs arranged for the speakers.

The emcee announced Professor Klaus last. “Rocket Development Center Supervisor Vil Klaus!”

As he said the professor’s name, audience members hurled insults.

“More like *missile* development director!”

“War criminal!”

Radical peace protesters were apparently mixed into the crowd. Klaus glanced at the hecklers as he slowly walked onstage. He showed no rage, keeping a serious but relaxed expression. He couldn’t deny the insults. The reality was that he *had* developed military-use ballistic missiles. With the world in crisis, he must’ve had deep, difficult thoughts of his own.

In that somber, disquieting atmosphere, the “Manned Spaceflight and the Lunar Landing” session began. The emcee kicked things off by bringing the crowd up to speed. Since Project Hermes had successfully put a person in orbit, he explained, ANSA’s next goal was the moon. However, getting there would require ANSA to overcome problems and difficulties they’d never faced.

The chief difficulty was choosing a lunar landing method. Given the UK’s current budget and technology, an Earth orbit rendezvous seemed like the best approach. The backup plan, direct descent, theoretically required a huge rocket called Galactica. Whether Galactica would actually be developed, however, was unclear.

“To reach the moon before the decade ends, we must finalize our plans—and soon,” the emcee said, turning toward the speakers.

As Bart expected, a debate broke out immediately between Professor Klaus and Director Kissing. The argument slowly ramped up,

with Kissing on the offensive.

"It's true that an Earth orbit rendezvous wouldn't require a Galactica rocket," he said. "Still, it would require us to launch fifteen rockets *and* develop all-new landing technology."

Klaus cocked his head. "By 'all-new,' you mean what, exactly?"

"Well, a single craft that can land on the moon and travel safely back to Earth will obviously be much bigger than any known spacecraft. Ensuring that such a craft has an adequate lower field of vision will also be challenging. Can you guarantee it'll land safely? A craft like that strikes me as even riskier than some other proposed methods."

Klaus's response was calm and collected. "If I'm hearing you correctly, you're saying that designing and producing a smaller, lighter spacecraft is impossible for the Manned Spacecraft Center?"

"That's no different from you saying Galactica isn't feasible!"

Klaus brushed Kissing off. "In any case, as long as direct descent is untenable, we have no choice but to put in the effort to achieve an Earth orbit rendezvous."

"If it were just a matter of effort, we could complete Galactica too!"

Bart listened intently. A compromise on the lunar landing method would be a monumental feat. If it helped ANSA staff focus on solving the problems with the Earth orbit rendezvous, he and Kaye wouldn't *need* to bring up their proposal. Unfortunately, Klaus and Kissing were a far cry from compromising. Instead, they were taking shots at each other.

"What do you gentlemen think?" Klaus asked, bringing the aircraft manufacturers into the debate. "You've signed spacecraft development contracts, yes? How do you suggest we accommodate the craft's lower field of vision during a landing? Isn't this a chance to show off our engineering skills?"

The aircraft manufacturers, who seemed petrified, were very restrained. Their answers were vague and evasive. Bold declarations were simply too risky; they might eventually prove impossible.

As the pointless debate went on, the crowd sighed. The government's scientific advisor tapped his foot in frustration, and the emcee looked at his watch, preparing to end the session early. The

discussion was going nowhere.

Bart and Kaye shared a glance. It was almost their time to shine. Licking his dry lips, Bart took off his glasses.

Just then, the state governor spoke up. “May I be so bold as to ask whether sending someone to the moon is even necessary?”

Bart stood there, glasses in hand, shocked. He wasn’t the only one—all the speakers froze. It felt like a bomb had gone off, shaking the very foundations of scientific development.

The governor leveled a smug smirk at the audience. “I’ve heard a great many constituents express the opinion that the UK’s space development budget would be better spent on defense. Isn’t that right?”

Bart heard some applause. With a clear and present danger—a literal crisis—before them, lots of people might feel even colder on the prospect of manned spaceflight.

But why had the state governor brought up that point here? Was interrupting the debate necessary? Questions swirled in Bart’s head. When he saw the governor raise a brow in satisfaction, it hit him: *He’s playing to the crowd to win them over.*

“I’ve even heard that *unmanned* spacecraft could achieve the UK’s exploratory goals,” the governor went on, enthused. “So, I ask you, why spend so much of our budget sending *people* to space?”

With a missile crisis happening right there on Earth, nobody had a good answer for the governor. He was implying that Project Hyperion was essentially part of a stubborn clash between superpowers—that there was no other reason to waste so much national funding. The speakers remained tight-lipped. Everyone waited for somebody else to speak, since one wrong word would draw the crowd’s ire.

Bart struggled to think of a response. The emcee was speechless, and the atmosphere in the hall grew heavier by the second. Even the state governor eventually looked fidgety and uncertain. He didn’t have an answer either—he’d simply made his comments in the heat of the moment.

Foreboding silence engulfed the auditorium. Bart knew he had to say something, but his heart was racing, and he felt choked.

At last, someone broke the silence. “I’ll tell you why we’re sending people to the moon.” It was Kaye. She rose to her feet, all eyes upon

her, and said firmly, “Because it’s there.”

“What in the world are you saying?” the governor demanded, looking perplexed.

Kaye stared at him, her eyes steady. “ANSA’s heard that criticism over and over. Why the moon? Why a manned spaceflight? But that objection’s always existed. Why climb the highest mountain? Why sail to the ends of the ocean? Why do you think, governor?”

Faced with the blunt force of Kaye’s question, the governor could only sputter. “Y-you’re asking me for a reason, but there isn’t one...”

“Right,” said Kaye. “There’s no particular reason.”

“Huh?”

“People have explored and broadened their horizons since time immemorial. Pioneers expanded Arnack to these western regions and developed Marine City! Only one thing’s changed: We’re moving our adventures away from the Earth we live on, to the sky and stars that exist above us.”

Bart wanted to support Kaye, but he remained silent.

“That reasoning may not seem logical,” the dhampir girl continued, “but we stand here now because of people who persevered and pushed onward even as the world called them fools. Some say the moon’s a big rock. But to me, it’s a one-of-a-kind sparkling jewel!”

The governor could do little but nod.

Kaye turned to the audience. “I believe that, when we reach the moon at the end of our adventure, the future will await! A future just like what we saw here at the 21st Century Expo. That’s why we’ll keep facing, and *exploring*, the unknown!”

The crowd was largely stunned, but a portion applauded.

The governor eyed the audience warily, wiping sweat from his brow. “Er... All the same, given our current predicament, increasing the military budget seems unavoidable. And going by Professor Klaus and Director Kissing’s discussion, the space program’s in a tough spot in terms of money *and* technology.”

Professor Klaus stroked his chin in silent contemplation.

There was no time like the present. As Bart readied himself, his gaze locked with Kaye’s. *Let’s do this.* Putting his glasses back on, he

raised a hand. “A word, if I may?”

“Please, go ahead,” said the emcee. “Bart Fifield, everyone.”

Bart took a deep breath, pushing away his fear and the butterflies in his stomach. He stood. “As computer engineers, Kaye Scarlet and I propose that the lunar landing method be reconsidered.”

Kaye nodded, demonstrating her support.

“Basically, we suggest resurrecting a lost proposal,” Bart continued. He glanced at his fellow speakers, then declared, “We recommend the lunar orbit rendezvous method.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Bart felt Klaus and Kissing staring daggers at him. The disapproval in their eyes lanced his heart, but Kaye had given him the courage to overcome that. With growing confidence, he handed the other speakers the documents they’d prepared.

Klaus snatched the papers Bart passed him as if they were an affront. Kissing and the scientific advisor likewise eyed them with disdain. The engineers representing aircraft manufacturers watched curiously, while Bart’s announcement left the governor and university lecturer with blank stares.

Distributing the proposal documents felt like walking over a bed of nails, but Bart and Kaye saw it through. Then Bart turned to the crowd. “This suggestion is admittedly very sudden—you won’t find anything about it in the conference materials. We apologize in advance if some of this is tricky to understand.”

The audience chattered at the development. Most were puzzled, but that didn’t matter. This proposal wasn’t for the crowd—it was for the decision-makers.

“Well, let’s get started,” Bart said, ignoring the itch to scurry away. He faced the speakers once more. “We consider lunar orbit rendezvous the simplest, most cost-effective landing method. You’ll find we’ve accounted for the key reason the original plan was dismissed—that it didn’t account for oxygen in the spacecraft.”

Their handwritten documents weren’t pretty, but the contents were correct. He’d spent all night ensuring that alongside Kaye.

A vein pulsed in Kissing’s temple. “We haven’t even docked or rendezvoused within *Earth’s* orbit. The required technology isn’t even

finished yet. Now you're telling us to do so in *lunar* orbit? You're dreaming!"

Bart and Kaye had expected that. "The technology for an Earth orbit rendezvous is no further along, though," Bart replied. "Right, Professor Klaus?"

"Yes, it's true that the technology has yet to be completed," the professor responded with some exasperation. "But we expect to finish it within a few years. Technology isn't the main problem with a lunar orbit rendezvous in the first place. The issue is sheer distance. The moon's orbit is much farther away than the Earth's. If a rendezvous failed on the far side of the moon, 380,000 kilometers from home, the astronauts would be stranded. The spacecraft we viewed as our great hope would become a coffin left to orbit the moon for eternity."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. They seemed to understand now that ANSA had originally dismissed the lunar orbit rendezvous method due to its risks.

"This is delusional fantasy. You neglect to consider our astronauts' lives," the scientific advisor said coldly. "Astronauts engaging in a lunar orbit rendezvous would have a less than 1 percent chance of safe return."

His critique was icy for the sake of self-defense. If he—a government employee with influence over the budget—agreed to a plan that caused casualties, he'd answer for it. He wasn't about to accept a proposal that involved such costly risks.

Bart, however, was prepared for the criticism. "May I ask whether you're basing that '1 percent' value on the results of calculations?"

"A lunar orbit rendezvous is so far from realistic, even calculating that would be a waste of time."

"So am I correct in assuming your concerns stem from the potential inaccuracy of autopilot systems...in other words, computers?"

"Exactly."

"How well do you understand computers?"

"I've read and understood documentation regarding their general functions and abilities," the advisor replied, his words intentionally vague.

He'd dismissed the lunar orbit rendezvous method despite lacking

understanding of the technology. He hadn't even studied computing properly. And the science advisor was no regular citizen—he was a high-ranking expert who influenced the national budget. Bart was enraged. Even the queen herself, whose schedule was unbelievably packed, had earnestly wished for time to study the technology in depth.

Putting a damper on his anger, Bart pressed on. "I'd like to reiterate that this proposal comes from computer engineers."

"You mean you've developed technology for a successful rendezvous?"

"I received no such report," Kissing cut in, frustrated.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Klaus, confused.

Bart began to feel overwhelmed.

"We haven't developed it yet," Kaye replied in his stead. All eyes gathered on the young dhampir woman. "At the moment, it's impossible."

Her words seemed to shock everyone.

The scientific advisor's fury broke the second of silence. "Is this some kind of prank?!"

Kaye did not wilt in the face of his fury. "Have you heard the phrase, 'What's impossible today is possible tomorrow'?" she asked the crowd. "Scientific progress *makes* the impossible possible. Look at this Expo's exhibits! It's clear as day that what we consider cutting-edge constantly becomes outdated as we develop new technologies. Computing is no different! Computers are advancing at a truly rapid speed. Those criticizing the lunar orbit rendezvous method ignore that simple truth."

"You're the computing room manager, are you?" The scientific advisor shot Kaye a threatening glare. "Can you say with confidence that computers will make a lunar orbit rendezvous 100 percent possible?"

Kaye allowed slight hesitation to show on her face. "Well, I can't say I fully understand computers. To be honest, even their inventors can't claim they completely understand them."

"This is ridiculous! What are we even talking about?!"

"Please understand, that's because of how fast computers are

developing! I believe that someday we'll create technology more than capable of even a lunar orbit rendezvous."

"Delusions, courtesy of Nerd Heaven! You're just possessed by the spirit of a long-forgotten scientist."

"The lunar orbit rendezvous method isn't a delusion," Kaye said. "It's a dream. And we have the calculations to make it a reality." Holding the red-faced advisor's gaze, she pointed at her forehead. "A rendezvous on the far side of the moon is impossible at present, but we can do one more thing to get closer tomorrow. We'll get a little closer daily, and with that constant effort, we'll reach the day when the impossible becomes possible! On behalf of all computer engineers, Bart and I guarantee it."

Addressing the audience, Bart said, "It might seem impossible to believe that people can do complicated work on the far side of the moon." Self-assured, he spread his arms wide. "Inside Kaye's head, we've successfully landed on the moon already!"

The crowd let out gasps of awe.

Bart then looked at Klaus, who still sat with his arms crossed. "The lunar orbit rendezvous method will let us use the Chronos V rocket currently in development. It'll solve the issue of the lunar lander's size too."

The professor still looked nonplussed. "I'm well aware of that."

"Professor Klaus, as the governor just said, ANSA's budget might well be reallocated to military expenditures under the circumstances. Manned spaceflight would be the first thing on the chopping block. Do you think we'll secure enough money to build fifteen rockets in this climate?"

"We will," the professor insisted.

Bart wasn't sure whether there was some basis for Klaus's confident response. "What about developing new landing technology?"

"That isn't the Rocket Launch Center's responsibility. Correct, Director Kissing?"

Kissing and the aircraft manufacturer representatives frowned at being put in the hot seat. Klaus was insisting on an Earth orbit rendezvous—an extravagant waste of the UK's national budget. He was ignoring the state of the world and disregarding the power of

computers. But if ANSA approved a lunar orbit rendezvous, a successful moon landing could conceivably use a single rocket. That would mean less work for the Rocket Launch Center, and their organizational influence would drop. If Klaus was insisting on an Earth orbit rendezvous for the sake of the Rocket Launch Center's status, it was incredibly selfish.

Bart couldn't state that in front of such a large crowd. Besides, he suspected there was another reason for Klaus's attitude. ANSA could only accomplish an Earth orbit rendezvous by launching over a dozen complex rockets into the Earth's orbit. Klaus wanted control over the lunar landing method to bring a very specific hope to life—one he could achieve *while* aiming for the moon. Bart knew exactly what that hope was.

"Professor," he said. "I grew up reading your books. You're the very reason I wanted to work in the sciences. It's a tremendous honor to stand here today, exchanging opinions with you."

For a moment, the professor looked pleasantly surprised by Bart's confession. His smile quickly faded, however. "Be that as it may—"

"For me, it's easy to imagine the real reason you favor an Earth orbit rendezvous so strongly."

"The real reason, you say?"

"If the UK achieves something as difficult as a multi-rocket rendezvous, we can use the same technology to build a space station. You're looking beyond the lunar landing into the future. To you, the moon's just one stop on the way to many others. You're imagining us passing Mars, weaving around Jupiter, and reaching the end of the galaxy. Right?"

The professor lapsed into thought, his brow furrowing again. "I always have a space station in mind, of course," he said at last, uncrossing his arms. "I believe we must start that project before the Union does. They have already made headway on rendezvous technology."

Bart sensed defiance from the professor, as if Klaus felt the UZSR's progress was no longer worth concealing. Perhaps he was revealing it here to garner support for an Earth orbit rendezvous. Kissing frowned, but Bart knew how Klaus felt. The professor wanted to protect his employees, earn renown as a scientist, and achieve the goals everyone

dreamed of.

However, a space station was little more than a scientific genius's vision. Instead of accepting that technology was changing around him, Klaus was stubbornly struggling to mold reality to his ideals to reach the ends of space before another genius: the chief designer of the UZSR.

"Professor," said Bart, "our enemy isn't the Union's chief designer."

Klaus's cheek twitched, and his face betrayed a flicker of uncertainty. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, but if we don't reach the moon, space stations and interplanetary travel will wind up being no more than lost dreams." Bart offered an apologetic nod. "Please consider the lunar orbit rendezvous method. At least discuss it from a fresh perspective."

In response to Bart's earnest plea, the professor put a hand to his chin, still not entirely convinced.

"What's impossible today is possible tomorrow," Klaus said. "There's certainly no question about the rate at which computers are progressing. But what if the tomorrow you described doesn't come for another thirty years? Possessing the technology to send astronauts to space before the end of the sixties won't necessarily guarantee their safety."

Klaus raised a good point—one for which Bart and Kaye had no counterargument. Their rushed handwritten documents lacked convincing safety data. *We just need him to agree to reassess a lunar orbit rendezvous.* Bart searched for the words that might persuade the professor to listen.

Meanwhile, Kaye stepped forward. "Professor, you once published a novel in which humanity landed on Mars via a Mars orbit rendezvous. The moon's way closer than that!"

"If you examine that scene from a modern perspective, it's riddled with scientific errors," Klaus replied with a bitter smile. Then he shrugged, adding, "More importantly, it's science fiction."

"But when you wrote it, you believed a Mars orbit rendezvous was possible, right?" Kaye countered, deadly serious.

"That was quite a long time ago." The professor refused to play ball. Pinning him down was like trying to catch the wind in a net.

“A long time ago.” Sadness welled in Kaye’s eyes. “That’s when you and your peers first claimed political asylum here in Arnack. You were assigned work in a remote research facility, since people labeled you a war criminal for developing ballistic missiles.”

The professor stiffened. The crowd whispered. Bart was uneasy about Kaye using the word “missile” at a time like this.

All the same, Kaye went on. “I imagine that was a period of despair. Yet you looked at the night sky and imagined traveling the stars. You never intended your rocket designs for war—you considered them a means to bring people’s dreams to life. Even raked over the coals, you held out hope. You wanted to secure professional futures for the subordinates you’d brought to Arnack. Right, Professor?” Her eyes flashed again with that same sadness.

That was when Bart realized Kaye wasn’t just trying to sway the professor; she was describing a life they’d shared. Both Kaye and Klaus knew how it felt to be at rock bottom in their world and still reach for the moon above.

“You overcame your past and made the UK’s manned orbital flight possible,” Kaye said. “Can I assume that, in doing so, you achieved a dream you held for many long years?”

“So?” The professor’s voice was raspy as he responded to Kaye’s impassioned statement. “What of it?”

“Well then—”

“Professor,” Bart cut in, no longer able to remain quiet, “why can’t we all contribute to *this* dream?”

Tomorrow will come. That was the dream Bart wanted to share.

Klaus let out a breath and nodded, though he didn’t reply.



Kaye clasped her hands to her chest, as if praying. “Would you at least reconsider the lunar orbit rendezvous method?”

“Please, Professor,” Bart added, his gaze resolute.

The crowd waited, holding its breath. Klaus cleared his throat, then scratched the back of his head. Finally, he said, “There may indeed be value in reassessing the idea.”

Warm delight flowed from Bart’s head to his toes at the professor’s words. He desperately wanted to share his overwhelming joy with the beaming Kaye, but he’d keep it under wraps until he left the stage. After all, Klaus’s official reconsideration didn’t mean ANSA had accepted their proposal.

Kissing heaved a loud sigh, perhaps itching to say more on the matter. The government’s scientific advisor, looking nonplussed, made an obvious show of calling over the conference emcee. Soon after, the emcee concluded the discussion on the lunar landing method. Following brief comments on rendezvous technology and space walking projects, the “Manned Spaceflight and the Lunar Landing” session ended.

The speakers left the stage for a ten-minute break before the question period, which would mostly feature the same people, although the governor and the scientific advisor would be off attending to the missile crisis. All but one aircraft manufacturer also bowed out.

As the speakers entered the green room, they gathered around the television for updates on the crisis. Unfortunately, there had been few notable developments. The UZSR’s fleet was closing in on the UK’s naval blockade, and the newscaster seemed to see his mission as fanning the flames of anxiety. *“At this rate, the world’s heading for nuclear war within the week! Sorry, that is to say, we can’t ignore the possibility of missiles being launched with no warning—”*

As speakers asked the aircraft company executives about increasing warplane production, Kissing walked toward Bart and Kaye and thrust out their proposal documents. “What’s the meaning of you two making these selfish suggestions?! This wasn’t even in the agenda!”

“Sorry, sir,” said Bart. “We wanted to give the best advice we believed we could.”

“Bart’s telling the truth, sir,” Kaye added.

“That’s not the issue! Why didn’t you alert me beforehand?!”

If they'd told him early, he would've shut them down on the spot—but they couldn't exactly say that. Jennifer was watching from a distance. She gave Bart and Kaye a cheerful thumbs-up but obviously made no attempt to help them.

Kissing was still raging when Klaus arrived. "Come, now," the professor said. "Their proposal was quite a shock, but these two *did* raise several points worth additional consideration. If you keep ranting and raving about how it's impossible to design and manufacture new landing technology, then there's no help for it."

The other man bristled at the barb, and his lips twisted into a snarl. "You're telling me you intend to endorse a lunar orbit rendezvous, Professor?!"

Klaus brushed him off. "I'm merely looking for the best choice among the options at hand." He turned to Bart and Kaye. "Bart, you said we'd all contribute to this dream, correct? I presume you meant the dream where you two fly us to the moon?"

Bart and Kaye nodded. "Yep!" they chorused.

Klaus's eyes crinkled in the corners as he smiled. "'What's impossible today is possible tomorrow.' The scientist who wrote those words was one of the main inspirations for my dreams of space, long before either of you were born. Today, you gave me a chance to relive those emotions." His eyes sparkled like those of an excited young man. Then, looking slightly troubled, he added, "Still, it's true that I have regrets about what's happened in my attempts to reach the stars."

Bart knew Klaus was talking about ballistic missiles. He wasn't sure what to say. Kaye, too, was silent.

Then Klaus clapped his hands, clearing the air and changing the subject. "As for the lunar orbit rendezvous method, let's not assess its feasibility using data you wrote by hand."

"We'll prepare typed documents as soon as we get back to the research center!" Bart replied enthusiastically.

As he did so, though, the television caught his eye. It was showing the range of the UZSR's missiles, and Laika Crescent was in the diagram's bright-red danger zone. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

Groaning, Klaus put a hand to his forehead. "I worry for our research centers," he muttered.

"They're still hard at work. Staff have evacuation supplies on hand, though. They're ready to escape to fallout shelters at a moment's notice," Kissing replied grimly.

Kaye's face fell.

"We're all worried," Bart told her.

"I know, but..." She paused, shaking her head. "While we're here, you and I need to do our utmost."

"Yeah. That's the best we can do."

Knowing that they had to leave their lives in fate's hands was endlessly frustrating, but the simple truth was that Bart and Kaye didn't have the power to change things themselves.

As the speakers watched the broadcast in silence, Lev, Irina, and Sundancia arrived. They were flanked by assistants and staff, all of them gloomy and pale. Soon afterward, the emcee came to announce the start of the question period.

The speakers gathered at the edge of the stage. Bart put his game face back on, forcing a smile. He didn't want the crowd to see him looking hopeless and anguished.

As he moved toward the stage, Lev whispered, "I thought your proposal during the last session was wonderful."

"I'm honored."

"Watching you and Kaye fight for your beliefs, I truly feel this nation's strength. Irina is also cheering you on in her quiet way."

Bart's heavy heart lightened a touch. "Thank you so much."

Lev wasn't finished yet. "The queen looked just as impressed."

"Really?"

Bart remembered then that, when he and Kaye met Sundancia in the garden the previous night, they'd told her that they *didn't* plan to propose the lunar orbit rendezvous method. He felt as though they'd misled her, so he was relieved to hear that the session had moved her in some small way. Still, their proposal must've come as quite a shock to her.

He glanced back at Sundancia pacing behind him. The queen's steps were soft and weak, as though she were losing a battle with gravity, soon to be crushed under the burden on her shoulders. Bart

thought again of her words from last night. As a member of the royal family, she could only say so much, yet she also hoped for harmony with the UZSR. Now, though, her hopes were on the verge of evaporating completely.

In his heart, Bart was praying for the same thing as Sundancia. *Let us find a way to work together, please.*

The question period kicked off with comments from Sundancia, Lev, and Irina. Bart and the other speakers waited in the wings, behind the curtains, while the queen and cosmonauts walked onstage. The crowd, who had been awaiting this moment, gave them a warm round of applause.

Though previously engulfed in gloom, the queen beamed as she stood before the audience and began her speech. "First, ladies and gentlemen, let me thank you all for coming here today!"

From her opening line, it seemed clear that Sundancia's speech had been written for her earlier. She didn't touch on the missile crisis at all. Her voice trembled at points, however, and her heavy heart briefly revealed itself as she said, "The 21st Century Expo shows that the world of space development has a...bright future ahead of it."

Bart thought back to the Sundancia he'd met just a night ago. As they discussed space travel, her eyes were genuinely attentive, and she lost herself questioning Kaye about computers. She hadn't been a queen in those moments—just an eighteen-year-old girl brimming with curiosity. Sundancia was still so young. What feelings weighed on her as the world hovered on the brink of disaster?

The royal secretary stood at the stage edge, watching the queen with a stern expression. He had the aura of a protective knight. The man was old enough to be Sundancia's grandfather but watched over her as he would his own daughter.

Finishing her speech, the queen told the crowd she'd attend the final session as an observer rather than a participant. Then she gave the stage over to Lev and Irina.

Lev took the microphone first, bowing to the crowd. Thankfully, no one in the audience was out to heckle the cosmonauts as they had Professor Klaus, but the passion and fervor the cosmonauts had once inspired was virtually gone. The crowd simply watched, waited, and listened for what the two UZSR representatives would say.

Perhaps responding to the tension in the air, Lev smiled. “Hello, everyone,” he said, his voice bright and clear. “It is an honor to stand before you today.”

The beginning of his speech was well rehearsed. Evidently, he’d delivered it numerous times as he and Irina traveled the continent. He continued by praising the Expo without bringing up the missile crisis. Irina’s speech was likewise superficial. The crowd heaved a depressed sigh.

Lev and Irina stood at attention afterward, their military bearing clear and their mouths shut tight. Both likely wanted to apologize that their namesake ships were loaded with missiles and headed for the naval blockade. It was just as likely that the cosmonauts’ homeland was keeping them tight-lipped. The Delivery Crew agent who traveled with them was offstage, watching the question period like a hawk.

When the three introductory speeches ended, the emcee invited Bart and the other speakers onstage. They sat in a semicircle with Sundancia at the center. Kaye sat on the far left, Bart next to her. Beside him sat Irina, then Lev. On the right side were Klaus, Kissing, and other important speakers.

The emcee started by laying the session’s ground rules. “Since we’re short on time today, we’ll field three questions total.”

That wasn’t many, given that the question period had drawn nearly a thousand people. However, the goal of today’s sessions was to raise the general public’s confidence in space development, and the Expo organizers had deemed three questions sufficient. The crowd, of course, wasn’t privy to that behind-the-scenes reasoning; they were undoubtedly disappointed.

“Please keep in mind that we’ll only field questions on space and space development,” the emcee continued firmly. “People with questions that stray outside those topics may be asked to leave, depending on the circumstances.”

Murmurs ran through the audience. Some attendees even left before the questions began. That disappointed Bart, but his own feelings were likewise complicated: He was just as afraid and worried about the missile crisis as they were. He hoped the question period would be entertaining enough to help the audience forget—if only for a moment—that the world was still on the brink of destruction.

"Without any further ado, let's go into our questions," said the emcee. The audience responded immediately, and lots of hands shot up. The emcee seemed unsure who to select as he scanned the crowd, then pointed to a young girl sitting in front of him. "This is the *21st Century* Expo, so let's focus on questions from the youths who will lead us into a brand-new age!"

The girl appeared to be an elementary schooler. "I love animals," she told the emcee, her voice sweet. "When I grow up, I want to work at a zoo. Using animals as astronauts in experiments isn't fair to them!"

That wasn't even a question; it was direct criticism. Still, the little girl was adorable and earnest. The audience gave her a round of applause.

The question would be tricky to answer, especially since it wasn't about technology. Holding back a wry chuckle, the emcee looked toward the speakers. "What do you think, Professor Klaus?"

Bart heaved a sigh of relief at his narrow escape. Beside him, Kaye did the same. The emcee probably singled Klaus out because the professor had starred in a number of science shows for young audiences.

Sure enough, Klaus responded gently and calmly. "Why *are* animals used? That is a difficult question, but you're right to ask it. Let's look at it another way: Do you like caterpillars?"

"I hate them!" the girl said. "They're creepy, and some of them are poisonous."

"Then is it all right for us to experiment on caterpillars?"

"Huh? Hmm..." The girl thought it over.

Lev and Irina exchanged a glance, their expressions softening a little. There was something sad in Irina's face, and her eyes looked almost tearful. That reminded Bart of a strange rumor he'd read in *Arnack News*, a tabloid that printed lies more often than not. The article stated that the UZSR had, in fact, used Irina as a test subject.

Bart and Kaye had discussed the rumor in the past. They'd decided that even the Union wouldn't run inhumane experiments on vampires. Looking at Irina now, though, Bart wasn't so sure. When he thought Zirnitra might have experimented on vampires in an effort to win the Space Race, his heart shriveled. He wondered whether the Union's impenetrable "Iron Curtain" was meant to hide such shameful truths.

“How about you weigh in, Mr. Fifield? You look like you’re really mulling this issue over.”

“Huh?” Bart’s heart skipped a beat. Caterpillars hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“What are your thoughts on animal experimentation?”

“Er, well...” Bart mumbled, fixing his glasses and scrambling for an answer. Afraid of sending the question period into dead silence, he said the first thing that came to mind. “I, uh... I actually feel sorry for both the animals *and* the astronauts! I get to stay here, staring up at the sky from my safe spot down here on Earth. But, um...if I’d been born a bottom-feeding catfish, I might’ve ended up a test subject! I’m sure I would’ve looked up at the sun and moon shining on the water’s surface, wanting to fly...”

The crowd responded with scattered applause. The little girl nodded, seemingly satisfied. Feeling as though he’d dodged a bullet, Bart sighed in relief. When he glanced at Irina, though, the vampire was staring right at him. A jolt ran through him, and Irina looked away in a rather prim, haughty fashion. Bart wondered what her reaction meant, but he quickly pushed the thought from his mind. He didn’t want the emcee to single him out again for appearing to contemplate the question at hand.

The next question came from a boy brimming with intelligence—the type who’d be right at home on the student council. “I’ve got a question for Lev and Irina!”

“Very well,” said the emcee. “Ask away.”

Lev waited for the question, smiling.

“We’ve got proof now that the UZSR’s ‘rendezvous’ was staged. What really happened during that flight?” the boy demanded, his question like a knife.

Lev leaned down to speak into his microphone. “The Union’s official report answers that,” he said—apologetically, but with practiced ease.

“I’m sorry that I am unable to comment further on the matter,” Irina said coldly.

The Iron Curtain remained as tightly closed as ever. Asked for their opinions, however, Klaus and Kissing speculated openly about the

staged orbital flight. Lev and Irina remained silent, making no attempt to argue. The Delivery Crew agent in the wings crossed her arms. She seemed annoyed that the attendees were prying into Zirnitran affairs.

Whether history's "first orbital rendezvous" had been staged was clearly up for debate, but cosmonaut Roza Plevitskaya was the true victim in the whole debacle. There was no denying that her *spaceflight* was utterly real nor that she was the world's first human female cosmonaut. The question of the staged rendezvous was raining on her parade. If the UZSR hadn't exaggerated the propaganda around her flight, Plevitskaya would've stood tall among the cosmonauts and astronauts now considered heroes.

Nobody doubted that Lev and Irina had flown through space, either. Still, when it came to their book, one had to wonder how truthfully they'd portrayed the UZSR. The Space Race had encouraged both nations to advance technologically, but nobody won if the goal was to badmouth your rival or insist you were the only victor.

"Miss Kaye Scarlet," the emcee asked, "what do you think, from a computer engineer's perspective?"

"Determining the authenticity of the Zirnitran rendezvous comes down to analyzing the available data," Kaye answered. "Furthermore, I sincerely hope that controversies like this will be rare in the future."

Rather than Lev or Irina, Kaye's eyes were on the Delivery Crew agent at the edge of the stage. A member of the Zirnitran party had whispered something in the woman's ear, and she was leaving with an icy glare. It might've been related to the missile crisis, but there was no way to confirm that during the question period.

The royal secretary who'd stood beside the Delivery Crew agent kept watching the queen with the same stern expression. Sundancia remained in the center of the half circle of speakers, looking as if she were chained down. She still hadn't spoken. Nobody had asked her anything, and she'd made no attempt to comment—she'd merely observed the proceedings, abiding by the rules that forbade royalty to comment publicly on certain matters.

Finally, the session arrived at its last question. "Perhaps a dhampir guest would like to ask something?" said the emcee, looking to balance the questioners.

Not one of the dhampirs in the audience raised their hand,

however. Surrounded by a crowd of almost a thousand humans, posing a question on space development must've seemed very daunting.

When none of the dhampirs responded, the emcee gave in to a plump little boy reaching both hands excitedly toward the ceiling. Bart recognized the child immediately. It was the boy who'd told Bart and Kaye that he was in the space club and who—planetary cookies in hand—declared that he'd one day join ANSA. Kaye must've recognized the child as well—when she saw him, she gasped in surprise.

The moment the emcee selected him, the boy sprang to his feet and blurred excitedly into the microphone, “Can we beat our enemies to the moon?! ”

His question was like a bludgeon to Bart. And, though it was indeed naive and childlike, that question lingered in many adults’ minds too. Lev and Irina, the so-called “enemies” the boy had referred to, exchanged rueful smiles. The Arnackian speakers frowned. Their nation hadn’t yet achieved much in terms of space development. Truthfully, they were a far cry from catching up with the UZSR, let alone *beating* them.

The emcee called on Kissing to answer. He flinched, but he smiled as he spoke into his microphone. “We’ll do our very best to pull that off, son.”

Professor Klaus nodded. “We have no intention of losing this race.”

Everyone saw space development as a competition. *What’s the ultimate goal, then?* A vague anxiety welled in the pit of Bart’s stomach, reminding him a bit of the misty rain still falling outside. *Which do they want more? To land on the moon and explore the far reaches of the galaxy, or to defeat the UZSR completely and utterly? Which is the priority?*

The boy gasped excitedly as he listened to the session’s renowned scientists give their opinions. The crowd likewise nodded with each comment. The missile crisis made it all too easy to see the Union as their enemy. Lev and Irina soon hung their heads, looking agonized. Sundancia peered down at her hands, balled into fists on her thighs. This wasn’t what she wanted. In her heart, the queen longed for collaborative development.

Kaye shot Bart a confused glance. *What do we do?* her eyes said.

Bart nodded silently but resolutely. If the world really could end

at any moment, he didn't want to regret not speaking his mind. He gathered his courage and asked the boy, "Why do we have to *beat* them?"

The child looked shocked for a moment. His eyes shone with innocence. "Well, if we don't conquer the moon first, the Zirnitrans will build missile bases *there* and control us all from space!"

Many audience members gasped. Yesterday, they might've laughed his answer off as a joke; now, though, it rang with a hint of truth.

Still, there was a solution to this problem that didn't involve "racing" at all. The speakers would've discussed it during the scrapped "Collaborative Astronautics" session, and it was exactly what they *should've* been talking about. Bart had a gut feeling that, if he didn't broach the topic and force it back into the conferencegoers' minds, it might never be brought up again.

"What if the UK and UZSR built spacecrafts and rockets together?" he continued. His voice was kind but incredibly determined. "And what if both countries' astronauts went to the moon together? What if we came first as a team?"

The sudden questions confused the boy. He cocked his head. "A team...?"

Bart could feel Kissing's stare pierce through him for even daring to suggest it. He wasn't about to back down, though. He hadn't said anything wrong. "How about it?"

"I don't think that's possible." The little boy looked troubled. "You're talking about a country that's trying to fire nuclear missiles. And they're transporting them right now!"

As the boy teared up, the sudden reminder of the crisis occurring around them filled the auditorium with heavy tension.

"Will they really fire missiles at us?" the boy asked Bart, his eyes begging for an answer. "What's going to happen?!"

Oh no. I've pushed him too far.

Bart wanted to comfort the boy, but the emcee interrupted, panicking. "And that wraps up today's question period!"

"Wait!" Bart cried, rising to his feet. "We've still got time!"

He couldn't let it end. Not yet—not like this, with everything in flux and no answers yet in sight. They could still help the boy, offer him the light of a bright future.

The emcee, however, was intent on shutting down the session.
“Time is exactly the problem—”

“We’re talking about developing space!” Bart shouted, cutting him off. He stared at the other speakers. “Why does our historical trip to the moon need to be a race?!”

Everyone raised their heads at once.

Bart waited a moment before continuing. “I know,” he said passionately. “I know that, during our long history on this Earth, our countries became archrivals. But space doesn’t belong to either nation! It’s not mine. It’s not yours. I think it’s a crying shame that the collaborative astronautics session was canceled, because it’s really something we should discuss!”

“Collaboration’s impossible.” Kissing’s words were icy.

“Because our countries are butting heads, you mean?” Bart retorted.

“No. The problem goes back much earlier than that. Space development’s far too intertwined with the military. Even fields we agreed to cooperate in—space medicine, for example—are dead in the water.”

“You’re talking about things we can reform. Improve.”

Kissing wasn’t about to have a change of heart. Although he remained seated, he was clearly looking down on Bart. “Nothing will change so long as the Union insists on their Iron Curtain. Arnack can extend an olive branch and share technology, but those rendezvous-staging conspirators will just steal everything we give them.”

His words were harsh, but it was undeniable that Zirnitra’s secrecy went too far. There was no room for compromise in the current war of intelligence. Lev and Irina kept their gazes low and their mouths shut tight. Whatever they said now would just sound like an excuse.

Unable to stand seeing them so anguished, Kaye jumped in to defend them. “Lev and Irina traveled the world and met all its people. Their journey even brought them here, to our Expo! I don’t think it’s fair to act as if all UZSR citizens are the same.”

Kissing glanced at the cosmonauts and scratched his nose. “Of course individuals differ. Nonetheless, I just can’t see a route to collaborative space development with Zirnitra. There are already barriers between the UK’s own people and departments. Look at the lunar landing debate!” Kissing was alluding to Klaus, but the professor closed his eyes, refusing to comment.

Bart unleashed all the pent-up frustration in his heart straight at mulish Director Kissing. “We used to think humans and dhampirs could never get along! Arnack just accepted that as common sense! But I’ve made friends with dhampirs. I’ve tried to understand them. I’ve worked at it. On the other hand, the ‘barriers’ *you’re* talking about come down to stubborn arrogance—to people who just want to dismiss other opinions, look out for their own interests, and cling to their pride!”

“What did you just say?”

Publicly criticizing a superior—and your own organization, to boot—was grounds for demotion. Bart didn’t mind, though, as long as his words left an impression. Today was the day to speak. An opportunity like this one might never, ever come again. He nodded at the worried Kaye, sending a simple message: *It’s all right*.

D Room was full of bright, talented employees; it would survive just fine without Bart. The most important thing now was bringing everyone together, sharing his feelings and hopes with the youths of the UK—those who dreamed of joining ANSA and who would lead it into the future.

“All we’ve seen at ANSA is failure after failure,” Bart said. “We’re still playing catch-up on photographing the moon’s surface, for example—the UZSR did that years ago! People criticize ANSA for wasting tax dollars, so we’ve barely got a budget. But if we aimed for the moon *alongside* the Union, we’d stop pouring that money down the drain!”

Kissing’s glare was crushing. “You’re suggesting we accept defeat and beg Zirnitra for help?”

“I keep telling you, space development isn’t about victory and defeat.”

“You and I are fundamentally different,” Kissing snapped. “We won’t see eye to eye, no matter how long we discuss this.”

“No, that’s not—”

“Compromisers will just rot ANSA from the inside.”

This isn't about compromise! Bart wanted to argue, but he wasn't used to confrontation. His hands and voice trembled, and he felt himself losing heart. But there was one part of himself he'd never lose: the small scar on his pinky finger. His thumb brushed the puncture mark. *I'm going to the moon with people who dream like I do.* This question period was a battle to defend his promise to Kaye.

Gathering his courage, Bart again leveled with Kissing. “I'm not suggesting the UK beg. This collaboration wouldn't be one-sided. It could be a chance to make up for each other's weak points, right? There were some ANSA meeting minutes that stated ‘The UZSR may be having as much trouble as we are; their grandiose announcements conceal their lack of technology.’ They parade cosmonauts around like heroes but won't even let them speak their minds!”

He couldn't look at Lev and Irina, given the circumstances they were stuck in. He knew they felt uncomfortable and that they wanted nothing more than to ditch the stage. Still, Bart had to tell everyone there, speakers and spectators alike, the realities of space development. He had to explain how close they were to their dreams ending as little more than that—dreams.

“At this rate, either the UK and UZSR will waste resources until one country's dream is shattered, or both countries will be destroyed! Imprisoned Island aside, isn't it time to reconsider our positions?”

Kissing held his forehead, letting out a deep, exaggerated sigh. “This is beyond ridiculous. You're a delusional idealist. Take a look around you. We don't fund our research out of pocket! ANSA's a government initiative built on tax money.”

“Yes, but...” Bart scrounged for the right words, but nothing came. The problems were piled far too high, and he didn't know where to start. He just stood there, hands balled into fists, biting his lip so hard he feared it might bleed.

The conference speakers said nothing, and a heavy silence fell. Sundancia shot Bart a sad glance, but he couldn't look her in the eye. The little boy who'd asked the original question stood in an utter daze, perhaps feeling somewhat responsible for what had been unleashed. The emcee, now at his wit's end, raised his microphone to his lips. If no one else spoke, he'd end the question period.

Just as Bart felt himself despair, Kaye stood. “Your question was whether we could beat the Union, right?” she asked the little boy.

“Y-yes.”

“I think that matters less than *reaching* the moon.”

“I-I’m sorry!” The boy’s shoulders slumped.

Kaye panicked. “Oh, um, don’t apologize!” she said, keeping her tone bright to cheer him up. “That’s just what Bart and I believe!”

“Okay...”

“But here’s the thing. You’re in the space club right now. And don’t you want to join ANSA someday?”

The boy’s face lit up. He couldn’t believe Kaye remembered him. “I do!”

“I bet all this talk about organizations and countries collaborating lost you, didn’t it?”

The boy scratched his head. “Yeah, a little.”

“Okay.” Kaye smiled gently. “Well, if I remember right, weren’t you eating planetary cookies yesterday?”

“Oh! I was! They were so good!”

“How about thinking of the moon as a cookie, then?”

“What?” The sudden suggestion puzzled not just the boy but everyone else too.

“What’s your name?” Kaye asked.

“Bill.”

“Okay, Bill. I want you to sit down and close your eyes.”

“All right.” He did as Kaye instructed, perching in his seat and shutting his eyes.

“Greetings, Bill!” said Kaye, her tone suddenly formal. She was imitating the Space Flier’s narrator again. “It’s two o’clock on May 13, 1962. This is Laika Crescent’s mission control center! We’re setting coordinates for your journey to your planetary cookie. If you look now, you’ll see that golden butter cookie floating 380,000 kilometers in the distance! It looks delicious, doesn’t it?”

The crowd chuckled.

Bart thought back to his night out UFO spotting with Kaye. He remembered her lifting a cookie toward the sky, saying, “From here, the moon looks even smaller than a cookie. Yet somehow, it draws both countries in.” Back then, all they’d had to worry about was the lunar landing method. Neither could’ve imagined facing a missile crisis.

“We want to eat those cookies, so far out of reach,” Kaye continued, now addressing the whole crowd. “That’s something we’ve dreamed of since long, long ago. Not just butter cookies, no—strawberry jam cookies, and gigantic marble cookies too! Cookies with icing rings around them! Sparkling, star-shaped sugar cookies in every color!”

The boy licked his lips, imagining the mouthwatering expanse of sugary space.

“But how do we get there?” Kaye put a finger to her cheek. “Plus, could we possibly eat all those treats alone? There are tons! How about gathering fellow dessert-lovers and working out a way there together?”

Kaye’s tale of interstellar cookies enraptured the crowd. She glanced at Lev and Irina and winked; their faces relaxed, and they nodded.

“Congratulations, Bill,” Kaye continued. “By working together, we landed on the butter cookie! To celebrate this tremendous achievement, we’ll split the cookie and wolf it down. How’s it taste?”

“Sweet?”

“And delicious, right? Now, let’s set our sights on that strawberry jam cookie! We’ll consult our teammates and launch a journey from this butter cookie to wonderful unknown treats. We can explore the depths of space together—sharing cookies, discovering new energy sources, and finding cures for complex diseases. In the process, we might even learn how people came to exist!”

Sundancia stared so intently at Kaye that she barely blinked. The shadows on her gaunt face seemed to disappear, replacing the regal queen with the bright-eyed girl Bart and Kaye spoke to just last night.

“Now we’ll set a return course for Earth. Thanks for flying with us today!” said Kaye. Returning to her usual tone, she asked the boy, “What do you think, Bill? Doesn’t that sound better than crushing our enemies and taking all the cookies for ourselves?”

Bill thought for a while, then nodded. “Yeah. Teaming up to get cookies sounds like it could be pretty good too.”

“That’s what ANSA will be doing in the future when you join. I just know it. Right, Mr. Fifield?” Adopting a more professional tone, Kaye turned toward Bart.

“That’s right,” Bart agreed. “Bill, we’ll be waiting for you with cookies so good, even UFOs want to steal them.”

“UFOs?! No way! I can’t wait!”

“Don’t you think so, Professor Klaus?” Bart asked.

The professor cleared his throat. “I don’t have much of a sweet tooth myself. However, I’m very focused on the space program’s search for hamburgers. Fellow gourmands are known to joke that I’m hamburger-stuffed,” he replied to much applause. “What do you suppose you’ll eat in outer space, Director Kissing?”

“Hmph,” Kissing snorted. “A baseball, probably.”

The crowd’s laughter was like light filtering into the gloomy space —a light that spread across continents.

“Do you think you’ll want pancakes, Irina?” asked Lev, who’d been entirely silent until now.

The vampire girl panicked at being singled out. “Huh?! Pancakes?!”

Lev grinned mischievously. “Anya told me that the moon is a pancake and that rockets are carrots.”

“That’s because Anya doesn’t know anything!”

“Oh. In that case, I apologize. What *would* you like to eat?”

“Hmm... Salmon roe.”

“Salmon roe?”

“What? That’s round, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it’s tiny. And it might burst in outer space if you aren’t careful.”

“Who are you to say it’ll burst?!”

Lev raised his hands to soothe the fiery Irina, then faced the crowd. “As for me, I’d like pryaniki. Er...those are round, sugary treats cooked in a frying pan. Many people in our homeland enjoy them. My

mother made pryaniki often when I was a boy.”

Bart had never seen or heard of pryaniki before, but he guessed they were a little taste of home.

Then Lev rose from his seat, looking out at the audience. “When I saw the UK from space,” he said, his voice bright, “I saw its beautiful natural environments, but not the faces of you who call this nation home. On this trip, however, I’ve eaten cookies and hamburgers, watched baseball, and experienced your lifestyle with all my senses! You have my eternal gratitude!” He offered a sweeping bow.

The crowd responded with warm applause, after which Lev stood up tall. There was great depth in his indigo eyes. He had the dignified bearing of a hero, looking every bit the same brave man who once gave a speech to three billion people around the world.

“Our homeland of Zirnitra excels when it comes to development. Yet Arnack is a country with the most amazing technology. I can’t help but wonder...what if we put our heads together, respected each other’s abilities, and worked to make up for each other’s weaknesses?”

Bart’s heart warmed as he listened to Lev’s speech. There was great hope in the cosmonaut’s words.

Lev himself stared straight ahead. He put a fist to his chest. “I dream of combining the recipes for cookies and pryaniki to make a delectable treat!” he cried, his voice powerful. “That’s a dessert I would love to taste, and the one I’d most enjoy sharing! I hope and dream that we’ll all taste it in the future!”

There were limits on what Lev could say in public, but he’d shared his hope for cooperation in his own way. Bart knew this was the “Snow Thaw” part of Lev’s personality that Irina had mentioned. He wanted nothing more than to run up and shake the cosmonaut’s hand, but held back the urge.

Irina stood and addressed Bill, who was gazing up at Lev. “It doesn’t bother me if you hate pryaniki,” she told him. “I don’t really like them either.”

Chatter erupted in the audience.

“Irina...” muttered Lev.

The young vampire just shrugged. “I’m talking about sweets,” she said, looking at her fellow cosmonaut. “Soda water and fruit liqueur are

all right. But pryaniki, nutmeg, cinnamon? They stink. I don't like them."

"All right, all right."

"Remember one thing, though," Irina continued, speaking to Bill again. "Rockets and *carrots* are completely different. Rockets are made to carry dreams. They aren't intended as weapons. I hate carrots, though. We'd all be better off if they sank to the bottom of the sea."

Although Irina danced around saying anything direct, the audience understood that she was referring to the missiles the cosmonauts' namesake ships were carrying across the ocean. Sections of the crowd applauded and shouted; some even whistled. Irina smiled, very pleased with herself. Lev put a palm to his forehead.

"That brings an end to our question period! Really, this time!" the emcee declared, forcing things back on track. "Your Majesty, if you'd be so kind as to give your closing remarks."

The crowd stood, followed by Sundancia herself. She hadn't said a single word during the discussion, and her rote, banal opening speech had kept her true feelings bubbling inside her. Bart was sure the queen's closing speech had been written for her as well. Her royal status bound her to a particular silence—one he didn't know how to free her from.

Standing at the center of the stage, Sundancia began speaking, her face tense. "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today." After uttering those words, she simply stood still, clasping the microphone.

What's going on? Bart wondered. *That can't be it, can it?*

Clearly the crowd was thinking the same thing, as they broke out into whispers.

"Your Majesty?" said the emcee.

Sundancia blinked. She hung her head, then lifted the microphone to start again. "My apologies. I... As you're all well aware, I'm forbidden to discuss politics in public as queen of Arnack." Her voice was low, and there wasn't a hint of a smile on her face. "I've been told not to share my thoughts on space development either."

This was different from her opening speech; something had changed. Bart saw the royal secretary and scientific advisor whisper to each other. He wondered whether the queen was making an announcement about the missile crisis.

Sundancia glanced toward the wings, then went on in a timid voice. “But, though some use it politically...I don’t consider space development *necessarily* political. Um...I hope you agree with me.”

About two-thirds of the crowd applauded in support.

“Thank you.” The queen sighed in relief. Her hands gripped the microphone tighter, and determination flashed in her eyes. “Regarding the Space Race... Perhaps, as the United Kingdom’s queen, I should tell you all something like, ‘Our nation must reign supreme.’ But I’ve tired of this competition, in all honesty.”

This absolutely floored the crowd. Bart couldn’t believe his ears. As the emcee glanced at the royal secretary, Sundancia shot them both a strong, impassioned look, imploring them to grant her this. The royal secretary’s glare conveyed a hard no.

Sundancia ignored him and faced the crowd. She wouldn’t be denied. “Compared to the speakers around me today, I lack knowledge and aptitude. I’m also inexperienced. Yet I know enough to tell right from wrong. Take, for example, Bart and Kaye’s suggestion that the UK and UZSR cooperate. Didn’t that give us hope? I’m aware that the road ahead won’t be easy. When I spoke to the two computer engineers yesterday evening, however, I understood the importance of mustering the courage to try. Bart, Kaye, thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Clasping her hands, Sundancia nodded deeply in appreciation. Bart and Kaye scrambled to stand, responding with deep nods of their own.

The queen turned toward the speakers surrounding her. “In light of that, I will gladly approve a collaborative lunar landing project, should one be proposed.”

These were no longer merely closing remarks; Sundancia was making a declaration. The royal secretary had initially looked ready to pounce onstage and stop the proceedings, but now he simply watched. With a furious expression, the scientific advisor whispered something in his ear, but the royal secretary refused to listen. Sundancia’s statement contradicted royal policy, but he’d decided here and now to put her feelings first. The queen was finally free of her chains.

“Until recently, space was the realm of the gods,” said Sundancia, her voice growing more confident as her pent-up thoughts and feelings surfaced. “However, we’re now aiming for the moon itself! I’ve heard

that, once we achieve an orbital rendezvous, space walks will quickly follow. In the near future, we may even construct an orbital space station! The first step to reaching those achievements is the moon.”

Bart realized his fists were clenched. The other speakers and audience were waiting just as intently for the queen to continue.

“The future displayed here at the 21st Century Expo is missing only one thing—the UZSR and its allies,” said Sundancia.

Lev and Irina lowered their heads apologetically.

“But in the real twenty-first century that will arrive one day, I believe the countries of the world will share snacks and sweets in a single space station.”

The cosmonauts smiled at the queen’s warm words.

Sundancia held the microphone in both hands, her face flushed with excitement, and began speaking of the dreams she’d hidden. “Arnack and the UZSR. Humans, dhampirs, and vampires. We’re all different. But there’s much connecting us and much that we share. Even if we don’t sort out all these issues today, can’t we discuss them with each new day that comes after? There will be misunderstandings, but we’ll come to know one another eventually. We were all born on one planet, floating in one galaxy, and we all dream of the same bright future.”

Both the audience and speakers broke into applause.

Sundancia nodded again in thanks, and her next words were heavy. “We’re nearing a crisis that may well destroy our planet. It’s a trial unlike any in history. During this conference, we debated canceling the space program—but we may not even see tomorrow.”

Waves of fear ran through the crowd, and their enthusiastic smiles disappeared.

“In the face of this crisis, I am powerless.” Sundancia spoke the words with great weight.

Bart’s heavy heartbeat thumped in his ears, and sweat beaded on his back. Next to him, Kaye gripped her skirt tightly.

With all eyes on her, Sundancia grimaced, tearing up. “Our world’s fate lies in decisions made by the governments of two nations.”

Strange tension filled the auditorium. The anxiety that coiled

around Bart's gut was so powerful, he thought he might be sick. It wasn't just him, though—everyone had frozen, their lips pressed in a thin line. No one could run from this despair.

In the depths of Sundancia's eyes, however, was the light of hope. "I believe wiser, cooler heads will prevail," she said. The words were prayerlike, and her voice didn't waver. "I believe that we'll avert this crisis, and our planet will escape destruction. That the sun will rise tomorrow, bringing us life's energy, and the moon will rise too, bringing peaceful slumber."

The queen walked to the very front of the stage, as if willing her words to reach the people outside the auditorium—the citizens of the world.

"I believe that we'll keep challenging the unknown and the impossible, that we'll reach the moon one day, and that a wonderful twenty-first century awaits us!" she finished with a bright, honest smile.

The crowd clapped hard, rising for a standing ovation. Bart and Kaye, the cosmonauts, and the session attendees stood to applaud the young queen of the United Kingdom of Arnack.

"Thank you," she said.

Sundancia's presence was dignified, and her eyes and blonde hair sparkled under the shining lights. She was more than just a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl. She was the nation's monarch, as noble and majestic as the sun itself.

By the time the conference ended, and everyone went outside, the rain had stopped. The Space Tower stood tall against the clear blue sky, and the asphalt streets glowed in the gentle light. A pleasant breeze blew through the City of the Future and past its monorail.

It was a beautiful spring day, but Bart's heart was heavy due to the dressing-down Director Kissing had given him. He was preparing himself for a demotion, although he genuinely longed to remain in D Room. Kaye had gotten her own dressing-down, but it'd been nothing like Bart's.

"Hopefully, I'll just have my pay cut," Bart muttered.

Jennifer, on the other hand, looked elated. “Either way, I certainly got my tax money’s worth from that conference.”

“I’m talking about my career here, Jennifer.”

Kaye patted Bart’s shoulder. “At least this wasn’t all bad. It seems like we made progress on the lunar landing method and cooperative development. We’re one step closer to our dream!”

“It’s still a long way to the moon. Besides, as soon as we get back, we’ll need to turn our handwritten notes into a proper proposal for submission.”

Although there’d been no updates on the missile crisis, Bart and Kaye chatted about work as usual. They weren’t sure what tomorrow would bring, but they’d decided to keep their eyes on the prize, working in pursuit of their shared goal.

When they returned to the hotel lobby, it was time to say goodbye to the cosmonaut’s tour party. It was also Bart and Kaye’s chance to finally have their copies of *The Journey to Space* autographed.

“We actually plan to release an updated edition,” Lev said, signing Bart’s book. “Do you mind if we write about meeting you two?”

“Be my guest!” said Bart.

“I wouldn’t get too excited,” Irina cautioned him in a low whisper. “Whatever the censors don’t like gets cut.”

That word caught Bart’s attention. “Censors?”

“Natalia—er, our state security agent—already gave us a dressing-down,” Lev admitted. He flicked his eyes discreetly at the Delivery Crew agent with the terrifying expression—Natalia, Bart presumed.

“Speaking of a dressing-down...” Bart described Kissing’s anger to Lev. He knew he shouldn’t celebrate the fact that Lev had been reprimanded as well, but the sense of camaraderie buoyed him.

Lev chuckled. “We both put our feet in our mouths, didn’t we?”

Irina stared at Bart for a second. “When you spoke onstage earlier, you were just like Snow Thaw Lev.”



Bart felt confused. “Huh? You mean...”

Irina grinned. “I mean, don’t get so heated that you punch somebody over it.” Lev poked her ribs. “Ow!” She leaped into the air, then glared at her fellow cosmonaut.

What did she mean, anyway? Bart was perplexed, but Lev told him not to worry about it, covering Irina’s mouth with one hand.

“Do you think those two fight?” Kaye asked him in a whisper.

“I mean, they *seem* to get along well enough,” Bart replied.

Looking at Lev and Irina, the differences between humans and vampires didn’t seem worth worrying about. Bart hoped he and Kaye would develop a kinship like theirs. He glanced at Kaye, and she nodded, smiling.

Lev and Irina passed the autographed books back to Bart and Kaye, then stepped closer and spoke in hushed voices.

“Just between us,” said Lev, “Irina and I think it would be wonderful if one of Comrade Chief’s rockets reached the moon equipped with an ANSA computer system.”

Bart and Kaye couldn’t believe what they’d heard. It was overwhelming to think that the cosmonauts shared their goal of cooperative development. As they blinked in shock, Irina added, “Lev, Aaron, and I would be the cosmonauts aboard.”

“I won’t forget that idea,” Kaye assured them, grinning as she tapped her temple.

Bart was so excited, he clenched both fists. “It’d be a dream come true!”

Words were easy, but the path before them was long and difficult. It still wasn’t clear whether that dream actually *would* come true. At the very least, all four of them shared hopes set in faraway stars. They put their hands together, and in that moment, Bart was certain they’d make their dream a reality in the near future—however improbable it seemed now.

Just then, Natalia seemed to sense that the group was up to something. She shot Lev and Irina an icy glare, and the two cosmonauts quickly backed away. Natalia pointed at her watch. It was time to get moving.

There was a touch of loneliness at the corners of Lev's smile. "Should you two ever have a chance to visit the Union, we can eat pryaniki and toast with nastoyka." He glanced at Irina.

"Nastoyka with cotton-thistle honey, of course," the vampire said mischievously.

"Nastoyka?" Kaye said, curious. The drink didn't exist in Arnack.

"It's a magical liquor." Irina put a finger to her lips. "Drinking it can provide a zero-gravity experience—even to you computer engineers who never leave Earth!"

"Even to us...?"

Lev and Irina didn't answer. Instead, they smiled and picked up their luggage.

"Well, unfortunately, it's time for us to go," said Lev.

Bart gave Kaye a signal. "Kaye, the send-off!"

"Yes! Let's take our seats!"

The computer scientists sat, knelt, and then stood. "Ready for launch!" they exclaimed.

Lev and Irina stared at one another, astounded.

Bart grew suddenly worried. "I read that's how people send their friends off in Zirnitra."

The cosmonauts grinned.

"It was perfect," replied Lev.

Kaye looked perplexed. "Kneeling, then standing... What does it mean?"

Lev frowned and knit his brow. "I wish I knew," he said. Bart and Kaye's jaws dropped.

Irina shrugged. "Ridiculous, isn't it? Still, thank you."

Perhaps the explanation for the movements mattered less than the feelings behind them. After that, Lev and Irina stood at attention.

"Until we meet again!" said Lev.



With warm, lighthearted smiles, the cosmonauts left Bart and Kaye and departed for home.

Their PR duties in Marine City completed, Bart and Kaye made their way back to Laika Crescent. The lavender shades of evening met them through their plane windows, and the moon was beginning its ascent. Bart heard Kaye sound asleep next to him, and only then did he remember how long it'd been since they last slept. So much had taken place.

The scar on his little finger itched. *No matter what happens, I'm here with you.* Bart hoped nothing would happen; that would be best. He prayed to the moon that tomorrow would arrive safely and soundly. For now, he needed to get some sleep. Lifting the blanket that had half fallen off Kaye, he covered her with it again. As he did so, he noticed her left hand on the armrest—and the small scar on *her* pinky.

He wrapped her little finger in his own. “It will come true,” he whispered.

The sleeping dhampir’s lips curled, forming a smile. “Mm-hmm...”

Coda: Outro

Blue Eyes

THE MISSILE CRISIS narrowly missed plummeting into nuclear war. Five days after the conference, the UK and UZSR made a covert agreement stipulating, “If Zirnitra removes its missiles from Imprisoned Island, the United Kingdom will likewise remove missiles from allied nations south of the UZSR. The UK also promises not to invade Imprisoned Island.”

The conflict had yet to end completely. Zirnitra hadn’t removed its missiles, and the UK’s naval blockade remained in effect. Still, a semblance of peace descended on the world.

Newspapers reported the event with the following: *“Queen Sundancia’s speech at the 21st Century Expo warned the international community of global crisis! Tensions between the UK and UZSR have eased in response, which may eventually develop into support for scientific collaboration.”*

Standing in the Manned Spacecraft Center’s lounge after returning to work, Bart and Kaye chatted about the situation.

“It’s a relief, at least,” Bart said.

“I’m glad they’ve worked out the missile crisis *and* your penalty,” Kaye teased.

Following Director Kissing’s dressing-down, Bart had been prepared for a pay cut. However, he’d only been required to write an apology—a slap on the wrist, basically. According to Jennifer, Queen Sundancia had contacted Kissing directly on Bart’s behalf. Even Kissing was powerless in the face of royal decree.

Far from receiving pay cuts, Bart and Kaye rose at the Manned Spacecraft Center. They met other staff who preferred the lunar orbit rendezvous method. Many had supported it for a long time, but they couldn’t say so due to the discord between ANSA departments. The researcher who’d originally proposed lunar orbit rendezvous even sent

Bart and Kaye a thank-you letter, along with tons of helpful resources. They would use those as the basis of the technical report which, once finished, would likely receive both Professor Klaus and Director Kissing's approval.

At the same time, it was unclear whether the government's scientific advisory board would accept their proposal. Bart and Kaye would need to persuade them to believe in the computers many higher-ups still mistrusted.

When Arnack One returned to D Room, ready to jump back into work, Mia was waiting for them with a letter. She looked shaken, which was atypical for the generally cool young dhampir.

"This...this is real, isn't it?" she asked.

Looking more closely at the letter, Bart and Kaye almost didn't believe their eyes.

"Kaye!" Bart exclaimed.

"Oh!" Kaye put a hand to her mouth in surprise, then beamed.

Enclosed with the letter was a signed photograph of Queen Sundancia in the royal palace gardens, Kukushka in her arms and an easy smile on her face.

Dear Bart and Kaye,

How are you? After the Expo, the royal secretary gave me quite a dressing-down! Fortunately, he now sees me for who I am...both as a queen and a fellow human being.

Apparently, after speaking with you two on the evening of our dinner, I contracted a serious case of space fever. Perhaps that's why I did what I did?

To live as this nation's queen is to feel crushing pressure. But I learned courage, thanks to the example you two set standing tall in the face of great hardships. I'll hold fast to what I believe, unwavering, and live decisively. I'll hold my head high and support those in need. As the sun that shines upon our nation, I have this duty to uphold.

I'm deeply grateful to you both. Please, be proud of yourselves as you confront the challenges before you, and as we head toward a bright, wonderful twenty-first century. I wish you the sun and moon's blessings on this grand adventure, filled with dangers never before known, alongside those

around the world who share our dream.

Your comrade-in-arms with a love for apple pie,

Sundancia Sophie Alicia

Queen of the United Kingdom of Arnack

Third Movement: The Vampire Princess and the Winged Dragon, '63

Indigo Eyes

• очи индиго •

IT WAS SEPTEMBER 19, 1963, the time of year when the cosmos flowers were wrapped in the pale azure night fog. In the space research city of LAIKA44, Lev and Irina were visiting Jazz Bar Zvezda. Back when Irina was seventeen, they'd made a promise while skating on a frozen lake to celebrate her twentieth birthday with zhizni, should she survive that long.

In the smoke-filled bar, the pair sat facing each other and clinked glasses full of the drink of life.

“Happy birthday!” Lev said.

“Mmm. Thanks,” the vampire girl replied. She brought the zhizni to her lips with a calm, mature look, but as she drank it, her face scrunched up in disgust. “Blegh! My tongue’s on fire.”

“Would you like some lemon seltzer?”

“I’m fine!” Irina snapped, her face already reddening. “But I want some of that sparkling wine I’ve been dreaming of. I can drink that now, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s my treat tonight. You can drink what you like.” Lev had a feeling she’d wind up stumbling around afterward, but he figured that was fine for this special occasion.

“Fly You to the Moon” played over the bar phonograph’s speaker. The song had only just made its way to the UZSR, but it’d been a hit back when the cosmonauts traveled across Arnack.

A year and four months had passed since then. In that time, unmanned spacecraft—namely, satellites and planetary exploration devices—had seen numerous successes, but orbital rendezvous and space walk technology for manned missions were still in development. History’s first moon landing felt ever more distant. Agricultural policy

failures had left the UZSR's economy in dire straits, and funds were far from abundant.

Arnack had officially announced lunar orbit rendezvous as its landing method. ANSA's leaders had convinced the government's scientific advisory board, which distrusted computers deeply. The news delighted Lev and Irina to the bottom of their hearts; at last, their hopes had come to fruition. They were certain Arnack's decision had resulted from the passion they'd seen at the Expo conference. However, they'd also heard that Arnack was a long way from finishing the project.

As the cosmonauts had expected, the UK and UZSR hadn't taken any meaningful steps forward on cooperative development. Still, there were signs of the countries' relations improving. The missile crisis, which had escalated to the brink of nuclear war, had been a lesson. Afterward, both governments signed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Gergiev had never intended to attack Arnack using the missiles. He'd aimed to place them as deterrents; he planned to make a grand announcement about the covert missile delivery on Revolution Day.

Gergiev began to compromise with Arnack, so there was light at the end of the tunnel, but reaching it was no simple task. A dissatisfied group within the Zirnitran government planned a coup that would've ousted Gergiev if not for Lyudmila's stern but justified response. The United Kingdom, meanwhile, dealt with an attempted assassination of its prime minister. Though thwarted, the assassin killed himself before his motivations could be brought to light.

An authority on international affairs identified the silver lining of the political situation: "Space isn't tied to any one country, which makes it relatively easy to utilize peacefully. There is indeed potential for collaborative development benefiting both nations' interests."

If only everything could go so smoothly, Lev thought, sipping his zhizni.

Irina, meanwhile, was already drunk. "Lev!" she hiccupped. "Thish shparkling wine's...delishious..." Even now that she was twenty, her voice still dropped into a cute lisp when she drank.

"Don't drink it too fast."

A little less than three years had passed since he met Irina, but so much had changed around them in that short time. The world was making huge strides. Still, it reassured Lev that—although Irina looked

more mature now—she'd remained innocent and naive inside.

When he gazed at her too long, though, she turned her red eyes on him. "Yer shtaring! What're you...shtaring at?"

"Oh, uh, I just thought I might have a glass of sparkling wine too."

The wine Jazz Bar Zvezda served was sour and quite sharp, a far cry from what Lev had tasted in Marine City's five-star hotel. He wondered whether the promise they'd made with Bart and Kaye would ever come true. Would one of Korovin's rockets land on the moon equipped with an Arnackian computer and piloted by cosmonauts from both nations? As he listened to the light jazz, he found himself daydreaming.

"Bartender!" Irina yelled, derailing his train of thought. "I demand spirizz!"

"Oh no, you don't," Lev interjected.

"You shaid I could drink what I wanned!"

Irina ignored Lev's attempt to stop her, and the bartender summarily poured her a hard liquor that was 96 percent alcohol.

Irina slumped across Lev's back, completely drunk, as he carried her toward the dormitories. It was late evening, and thick fog draped the tree-lined path. There wasn't a person in sight.

"Fly...you to...the moooon..." Irina half sang, half hummed the tune as she drifted in and out of slumber, resting her head on Lev's shoulder.

You took the words right out of my mouth, Lev thought.

To Irina, going to the moon was everything. Lev wanted to help her get there, whatever it took. Now that most of their duties kept them chained down, though, he wasn't sure how. They also had to worry about Korovin's health. He'd collapsed just before Lev's orbital flight, and he never looked well recently. On top of struggling with chronic illness, he pushed himself too hard.

Lev walked through the misty evening, his thoughts and feelings unsettled.

“Hey, Lev,” Irina murmured into his ear.

“Hm?”

“The moon’s so pretty!”

Lev looked at the night sky. Above the path, the moon shone bright. It glowed blue-white, its light bathing every particle of evening fog. The line between land and sky was hazy, as though the path Lev was strolling was itself a runway to the moon.

“It’s like we could walk right over to it,” Lev whispered.

“Great!” shouted Irina. She kicked him sharply in the butt. “Lev! To the moon, on the double!”

“Ow! Don’t kick me!”

“Onward! Take me to the moon!” She was a noble vampire—a person of the moon—and her words kindled a fire in his heart.

“Hang on!” he cried.

Lev took off running with everything he had. He’d keep running, on and on, until the day they dreamed of finally came—the day they would keep the promise they made in Arnack.

But Lev could never have imagined the tragedy looming right around the corner, one that would go down in history.

And with that, the challenge continued...

Afterword

H! In this afterword, we'll look at historical facts behind this story. I'll start by answering questions readers asked on Twitter about Volumes 1-3!

Q: It was shocking to see you depict vampires not as intimidating monsters but as a less powerful race. What inspired that?

A: That idea sprang from medieval portrayals of vampires, which predate more recent works of fiction that posit vampires have myriad strengths and abilities (Irina dispels such notions to Lev in Volume 1). Irina's milk drinking and fear of heights are completely made up, and vampires lacking a sense of taste was an editor's suggestion.

Q: Was Irina modeled on someone in particular?

A: She was modeled on some *things*; they just weren't human. In early 1961, the Soviet Union launched a mannequin (Ivan Ivanovich), and the United States launched a chimpanzee (Ham). Both inspired Irina. It is true that, since the Soviet launch was top secret, they broadcast a cooking program over the radio to avoid interceptions by the Americans. I added the detail about the liqueur recipe in Volume 1.

Q: Your novel inspired me to learn more about space development, so I watched the movies *Apollo 13*, *Gagarin: First in Space*, and *Hidden Figures*. What movies, books, and materials did you use as references?

A: Many of my materials are old and out of print, so I'll share examples that are easy to get a hold of. For movies, there was *Ham: A Chimp into Space*, a French film about the chimpanzee Ham, and *Space Race*, a docudrama that gave me a researcher's view of the rivalry and provided models for Korovin and Klaus.

In terms of books, there was *Two Sides of the Moon: Our Story of the Cold War Space Race*, which offers lots of information on both nations involved, and *Marketing the Moon: The Selling of the Apollo Lunar*

Program. When I decided to write from a perspective unlike the one in *Hidden Figures*, the latter book helped me land on the idea of Arnack's PR "billboards."

Q: Did the protest march at the end of Volume 3 actually happen?

A: That was fictional. There were numerous protests at the time, though, so maybe someone held a similar march in a city corner somewhere! I thought up the march while I was using a stair climber and happened to see a commercial for Aimer's song "ONE." Laika Crescent is modeled on New Orleans, and Orleans is "Orléans" in French. The city of Orléans is famous because of Joan of Arc, which made me think of a rebellious saint clasping a flag. In short, Kaye was modeled on Joan of Arc.

From here on, I'll write about Volume 4. If you want to avoid spoilers, please save this until you're done reading the volume!

I based this volume's Expo on the Century 21 Exposition (aka the Seattle World's Fair), which took place from April to October of 1962. I modeled the futuristic, space-age themes and pavilions after the real things; there was also a real conference, but its topics differed from this novel's.

The real Soviet cosmonaut who visited the Expo was not Yuri Gagarin but Gherman Stepanovich Titov, the second human to orbit Earth. Just as I moved up Arnack's successful spaceflight by six months, I also placed the missile crisis earlier. It's true, however, that President Kennedy couldn't deliver his speech at the Expo because of a "cold." (Whether he was absent for a particular reason isn't clear.) It's also true that a cargo ship named *Gagarin* was headed for "Imprisoned Island." I honestly couldn't quite believe that.

Another fact is that the US and Soviet Union agreed to cooperate insofar as making space development a nonmilitary sector. If Kennedy hadn't been assassinated, and Khrushchev not ousted, the Space Race could've gone in an entirely different direction. More on that in the short scene preceding this afterword.

Sundancia appears as "queen" in this story, but she's essentially this volume's Kennedy. (I drew on his speeches for various lines and numerous characters.) In fact, right up until I finished Volume 1,

Arnack was the “United States.” I felt that was too on the nose, however, so I went with “United Kingdom.” Still, there’s one place in the first volume where we forgot to change “president” to “prime minister.” (They’ve corrected that in the second edition, but apparently not in the ebook version, so let me point it out here.)

Oh, on another note, do you know of any Seattle-born Bills interested in science? The child in this volume is purely fictional, but the genuine article actually did visit the Expo as a young boy!

This volume was possible thanks to the help of many.

KAREI-sensei, your cover art’s so wonderful that it alone could send me to the moon.

Tabata, thanks to your responses to the “light” sections of this light novel, I’m confident that it’s “light” enough.

And thanks to everyone supporting me. Because of you, we made it here to Volume 4. You have my gratitude.

By the way, as I write this afterword, JAXA happens to have announced on the news that they plan to develop a manned lunar lander—the first since the Apollo projects! They’re aiming for a 2030 landing. It’d be amazing if someone joined a program like that after reading this story.

In both reality and fiction, the path to the moon is unknown. But we can all share the same dream.

Your comrade-in-arms with a love for seafood pizza,
Keisuke Makino

From the Author

Keisuke Makino

In addition to light novels, I write for games and TV dramas.

I always mention food here, and this time around I'd like to eat Belgian waffles!

Books by Keisuke Makino

Flick & Break

Flick & Break, Vol. 2

Flick & Break, Vol. 3

Irina: The Vampire Cosmonaut

From the Artist

KAREI

My canines got super pointy, just like vampire teeth. My inner edgelord thought they looked so cool... Unfortunately, they made it really easy to get mouth ulcers, so I had 'em shaved down. Ouch.

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